

Green Beret in Vietnam

1957-73



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Warrior • 28

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CONTENTS

SPECIAL FORCES OVERVIEW

Image and reality

CHRONOLOGY

SPECIAL FORCES IN VIETNAM

Special Forces organization

SPECIAL FORCES TRAINING

Enlistment, initial training, and SF recruitment
Special Forces training • Deployment to Vietnam

SPECIAL FORCES CAMP

Touring a camp • Camp life

WEAPONS OF THE SPECIAL FORCES SOLDIER

Individual weapons • Crew-served weapons

LIFE IN THE FIELD

Returning home

NOTES

GLOSSARY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

COLOR PLATE COMMENTARY

GREEN BERET IN VIETNAM 1957– 73

SPECIAL FORCES OVERVIEW

When Special Forces (SF) soldiers reflect upon their service with the US Army's complex and controversial involvement in Vietnam, they rarely relate similar experiences. Such men were asked to fulfil a wide variety of operations and missions – camp strike forces, mobile strike forces, mobile guerrilla forces, special reconnaissance projects, training missions, and headquarters duty – and each provided vastly different circumstances for SF soldiers.

The span of time was an equally important factor that affected the experiences of SF soldiers. Special Forces' involvement in Vietnam began in 1957 and ended in 1973. Even a difference of one year would result in contrasting perspectives, as the war was fought in a constantly changing environment. Terrain and weather conditions were similarly important. Vietnam offered varied geographic environments, ranging from chilly, forested mountains in the north, vast open plains in the central highlands, triple-canopy inland jungles, dense coastal swamps, and the inundated flood plains of the Mekong Delta. It was often said that Vietnam has three seasons; wet, dry, and dusty, which recur at approximately hourly intervals.

The effectiveness of an SF detachment was often determined by the personality of its members. While a certain degree of guidance was provided in the operation of A-camps and other SF activities, there was no official doctrine guiding day-to-day operations. In Vietnam, there was only "lore," and what was found to work best in a given situation. Expedients, substitutes, ingenious makeshift efforts, and resourcefulness were a matter of course. There were inevitably similarities between camps, but differences in routine were often vast.

This book will focus on the experiences of SF troops involved with camp strike forces. The more glamorous Special Forces missions, reconnaissance projects, and MIKE Forces for example, are more publicized in popular literature, but it was the A-camps that epitomized the heart and soul of Special Forces in Vietnam.



All SF troopers were required to specialize in a specific skill. Here communications NCOs practise encrypting and transmitting messages.

The camps, which were usually staffed by fewer than a dozen Americans in some of the most remote and inhospitable regions of Vietnam, were bases for indigenous, irregular counterinsurgency forces. They struggled to stifle the flow of enemy forces and supplies from across the borders, and they secured isolated ethnic minority villages to prevent their exploitation by ruthless enemy forces. The A-camps experienced counterinsurgency at grassroots level and were involved in all aspects of counterguerrilla warfare; training, advising, and fighting with indigenous troops. To this end, they were also involved in the interrelated field of psychological operations (influencing the opinions, attitudes, and behavior of enemy forces, indigenous populations, friendly and military), civic action (improving local economic and social conditions), and intelligence collection (through reconnaissance, informers, and low-level agent nets in the camp's area).



SF training focused on the practical as well as the technical. Here a group of engineers attempt to construct a bridge with only hand tools. They would later destroy it as part of their demolitions training.

Away from the battlefield, Special Forces gave medical, educational, agricultural, and housing construction assistance to the troops' families and local villagers. MEDCAP (MEDical/Civic Action Program) visits to local villages were routinely made.

Image and reality

The popular image of Special Forces, which has unfortunately been influenced by the inane vision of John Rambo and other equally far-fetched motion picture characters, is far from reality. Such flamboyant, risk-taking characters would not have survived a single contact. The image of SF during the Vietnam era was also influenced by Robin Moore's fictionalization of some more "glamorous" exploits, *The Green Berets* (1964); John Wayne's motion picture of the same title (1968), and Staff Sergeant Berry Saddler's popular song, "The Ballad of the Green Berets" (1966). Rumors, assumptions, war stories, and the efforts of the John F. Kennedy Center for Special Warfare to promote its capabilities in countering communist-sponsored "people's wars" were just as much responsible for the popular image of Special Forces.¹

Soldiers invariably reflect the society that spawned them, and Special Forces soldiers demonstrated the highest values of American society. Most SF troopers were conservative by nature, but virtually apolitical.



SF students prepare to launch a 12ft semi-rigid assault boat. A 40hp outboard motor will be mounted on the transom. This type of training was often incorporated into hands-on exercises in the field rather than through formal instruction.

A typical SF trooper, although most would resent such a generalization, was of higher than average intelligence (determined by extensive testing), no more physically fit than other paratroopers, generally moderate in temperament, and able to maintain a sense of humor (a critical requirement in Vietnam), which often leaned toward the dark side. There were heavy drinkers and teetotallers, hardcore lifers, rednecks, cowboys, intellectuals, surfers, and motorcycle-gangsters, to name a few. None were fanatical or ultra-right wing as often envisioned by a paranoid Hollywood.



A specialist 4 of the 5th SFGA headquarters endures the SF-run jump school at Dong Ba Thin where MIKE Force troops undertook jump school. The school was considerably tougher than Ft Benning, Georgia.

There was a tendency to cut-up during training, and pranks were commonly inflicted on non-SF units and themselves without prejudice. However, SF was not a group of wild, rebellious misfits as portrayed in many motion pictures, although some senior commanders might argue otherwise. Regardless of personal attitudes, they were professional in appearance and actions. They were distinct individualists from a broad range of backgrounds with several things in common. Most were looking for something different and challenging, they wanted to prove themselves, and they were idealistic in a mildly patriotic, and at that time, unpopular way. Admittedly, most troopers distrusted overbearing, power-hungry, overly career-oriented officers.

Though it was not the goal of the selection process, troopers tended to have common attributes. Most were somewhat rebellious and independent, but still capable of working as members of a team; plus they tended to

support the underdog, an invaluable attribute when it came to working with indigenous troops. They were all strongly anti-communist, though not because of indoctrination or political nurturing. All were triple volunteers, for the Army, Airborne, and Special Forces. They had to be at least 20 years old, have the same General Technical score (a form of IQ score) as required of officers, and have no police record. However, a surprising number had been in minor trouble with the law. A comparatively clean record was needed to obtain the required security clearance.

They represented all sectors of society, but most had middle-class backgrounds. No figures exist, but minorities were poorly represented. Blacks, Hispanics, Indians, and other minorities were found in numbers far below the Army-wide average. However, among the minorities accepted into SF, race discrimination was a rare complaint; one had only to prove oneself as an SF soldier and acceptance was complete. Religion was not a subject of discussion. One practised or did not practise as one saw fit.

A typical A-team's age spanned over 20 years, ranging from young SF soldiers on their first enlistment to a team sergeant who might be looking toward retirement. Military experiences were many and varied.

They worked hard and played with the same vigor. SF had its heavy drinkers, but a lower than average number of smokers at a time when smoking remained common (cigarettes were still included in C-rations). There were some genuine troublemakers, but they remained in SF because they could contribute. There were ongoing feuds between individuals, some resulting from real or perceived mistakes made in combat or even on training exercises, competition for promotion, women troubles (SF was said to have the highest divorce rate in the Army), and simple personality conflicts between strong-willed individualists.

Special Forces was not a branch. No one was permanently assigned, although most NCOs served their entire careers in SF, with only occasional stints elsewhere. Officers were detached from combat arms branches to which they would return after an SF tour. Some returned to serve with SF, others did not. A small number of officers served much of their career with SF (limiting their future progression and assignments) and many of them were key in charting SF's course and development. But, it was the senior SF career NCOs who defined the organization's character.

SF resisted institutionalization and the formalities common elsewhere in the military. Such traditions as organization day, prop blast ceremonies,

dinings-in, and NCO academies were shunned. The key social event for an SF unit was a family barbecue in the unit area or someone's home (a practice observed even in Vietnam, *sans* families). SF was basically comprised of men loyal to an operational concept: special warfare.

SF as an organization was not a model of military theory and practice. Many in SF only reluctantly admitted association to the US Army, insisting that their organization was US Special Forces (USSF) and not US Army Special Forces (USASF). When a 1,200-man SF group was required to attend, for example, a retirement ceremony at Ft Bragg, its five companies might make their way individually to the parade ground where the group would assemble as a body and depart in the same manner. Realistically, no attempt would be made to march the group on to the parade ground or conduct a pass in review; it had been tried and it seldom went smoothly. The "other Army" was too rigid, too regimented, and far too noisy. SF troopers were appalled at how conventional soldiers were treated by their officers, although their treatment was still high by any other army's standards. However, after the more relaxed attitudes of Special Forces, it seemed almost draconian. Within SF, even spec. 4s and buck sergeants were permitted a remarkable degree of latitude and responsibility.



A USSF trooper and CIDG Striker display their combat equipment. The Striker is armed with a .30cal M1A1 carbine with a folding stock while the SF soldier has a 5.56mm M16A1 rifle. He carries its 20-round magazines in a BAR belt.

The most significant attitude in SF was that everyone did whatever it took to accomplish the mission, regardless of their rank. Paratroopers of the 82d Airborne Division at Ft Bragg were stunned to see long-serving master sergeants and sergeants first class policing up pine cones in SF unit areas or shaking out parachutes alongside spec. 4s, because their A-team had been assigned the duty. That is one of the primary factors of SF effectiveness, and that is why SF buck sergeants with less than two years service were able to lead indigenous companies in Vietnam without supervision.

All of this resulted in a group of well-trained individualists welded into functional teams with the flexibility, ingenuity, imagination, experience, maturity, and desire to accomplish whatever mission they had been given. Teamwork was paramount, there is no “I” in “Team.” The lack of a rigid doctrine² allowed them the leeway to accomplish their tasks in unusual environments and circumstances, with austere support, low visibility, and limited political repercussions. A common attitude found among SF soldiers when given a task, be it a menial work detail or a mission to raise and train a village defense force, was, “Tell me what you want done and I’ll do it, but don’t tell me how to do it.”

CHRONOLOGY

1950s

June 11, 1952 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) (SFGA) activated at Ft Bragg, NC. This first SF unit deployed to Germany in 1953.

September 25, 1953 77th SFGA activated at Ft Bragg (redesignated 7th SFGA on May 20, 1960).

June 24, 1957 1st SFGA activated on Okinawa.

June 1957 14th SF Detachment begin training Vietnamese commandos.

November 1, 1957 Vietnamese 1st Observation Group formed as a special forces unit after initial training by USSF.

January 1959 North Vietnam (Socialist Republic of Vietnam – SRVN) issue a resolution that changes its “political struggle” in South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam – RVN) to an “armed struggle.”

May 1959 SRVN begins major improvements on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to supply its struggle in RVN.

1960

May Detachments from 1st and 7th SFGA begin rotating to RVN and three commando training centers are organized.

December 20 The National Liberation Front (NLF) is formed by SRVN and disguised as a communist RVN initiative. The Viet Cong (VC) is its military arm.

1961

January 28 President Kennedy approves a counterinsurgency plan requiring the RVN Government and armed forces to reform.

May Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Program conceived as the Area Development Program and initiated by CIA. It is redesignated the CIDG in 1962.

September 21 5th SFGA activated at Ft Bragg to rotate detachments to RVN.

November 1 RVN 1st Observation Group redesignated 77th LLDB Group.

November Mountain Commando Program initiated by CIA; later redesignated Mountain Scout Program.

December 3 USSF begin training Montagnard self-defense forces; the Buon Enao experiment. Initiated by the Combined Studies Office, US Operations Mission in Vietnam.



Future interpreters fire for qualification with the .30cal M2 carbine while undergoing the eight-week Combat Interpreter Course, Nha Trang. The SF soldier in the center fires a .45cal M3A1 submachine gun.

1962

February 3 Rural pacification (strategic hamlet) program begins to relocate rural villagers to RVN Government-controlled areas.

February 6 Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) formed to control all US armed forces in RVN.

June Trailwatcher Program initiated by CIA; redesignated Border Surveillance Program in 1963.

November 8 US Army Special Forces, Vietnam, Provisional (USASFV) formed to control all in-country USSF operations; a miniature SF group.

1963

February 1 RVN 77th LLDB Group reorganized and 31st LLDB Group formed.

March 15 LLDB Command formed to control 31st and 77th LLDB Groups.

July 1 USASFV assumes support of the CIDG Program in Operation SWITCHBACK with LLDB in command.

October 26 CIA turns its Border Surveillance Program over to USASFV.

November 22 President John F. Kennedy is assassinated.



A sergeant first class instructs Montagnard self-defense force recruits on the disassembly of the .30cal M2 carbine. Two LLDB NCOs in “duck-hunter” camouflage assist him. Such instruction often had to be relayed through an English–Vietnamese interpreter before communication via a second interpreter who spoke the local dialect.

1964

January 16 MACV-SOG formed to conduct unconventional warfare operations in the RVN and adjacent countries.

April RVN forms Special Exploitation Service as its contribution to MACV-SOG.

May 15 Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam disbanded.

May 15 Project LEAPING LENA established by USASFV for countrywide special reconnaissance operations.

June 20 Gen. William Westmoreland assumes command of MACV.

September 1 The 31st and 77th LLDB Groups redesignated 111th and 301st LLDB Groups respectively.

September 19 Montagnard uprising at four camps in the Ban Me Thuot area due to mistreatment by LLDB. A settlement is negotiated by USSF on September 28.

October 1 The 5th SFGA begins phased deployment to RVN and assumes control of all USSF operations in-country.

October Operation SWITCHBACK transition completed.

1965

March 8 First US Marine ground combat troops arrive in RVN.

April 6 US ground troops authorized to conduct offensive operations.

May 7 First US Army conventional ground combat troops arrive.

June Project LEAPING LENA redesignated Project DELTA (B-52).

June 15 First offensive ground action by conventional US troops.

July Mobile Strike (MIKE) Forces begin to be formed by 5th SFGA.

July 30 US Army, Vietnam (USARV) is formed to control Army forces, but 5th SFGA remains under MACV control.



Newly assigned 5th SFGA troopers, who are attending the Combat Orientation Course, prepare to practise a break contact drill on Hon Tra Island off the coast from Na Trang. They have already purchased their tiger-stripe "boonie" hats, but will not be issued tiger-striped uniforms until assigned to their camps.

1966

March 11 A Shau Strike Force Camp is overrun.

August Projects OMEGA (B-50) and SIGMA (B-56) formed by 5th SFGA for reconnaissance operations in II and III CTZs respectively.

September Mobile Guerrilla Forces begin to be formed by 5th SFGA.

September 15 MACV Recondo School formed by 5th SFGA at Nha Trang.

1967

June Project GAMMA (B-57) formed by 5th SFGA to collect intelligence on NVA bases in Cambodia.

September RVN Special Exploitation Service redesignated Strategic Technical Directorate (STD).

October Mobile Guerrilla Forces absorbed into MIKE Forces.

November 1 Projects OMEGA and SIGMA transferred to MACV-SOG and Command and Control North, Central, and South formed.



An SF NCO instructs a Montagnard Striker in close-reconnaissance techniques. Although SF provided training to the often-experienced Strikers, it was a two-way exchange. The SF learned much from the Strikers, particularly the Montagnards, who were totally attuned to their natural environment.

1968

January 30 VC and NVA initiate the Tet Offensive, which ends on 26 Feb.

February 7 Lang Vei Strike Force Camp is overrun by NVA tanks.

March 31 US Government announces a de-escalation of its war effort.

May 12 Peace talks begin in Paris.

July 1 GEN Creighton Abrams assumes command of MACV.

1969

June 8 The US initiate the Vietnamization programme to turn the war effort completely over to RVN forces.

Late Camp Strike Forces begin to close or are converted to RF/PF.

1970

May Duc Hue and Tra Cu Camp Strike Forces and 3d MIKE Force engage NVA forces during the US incursion into Cambodia.

August – December Remaining Camp Strike Forces are converted to Border Rangers.

November 21 Son Tay Prison Camp raid in North Vietnam by SF task force.

December 31 CIDG Program is terminated and LLDB is dissolved the next day.

1971

March 1 US Army Individual Training Group (UITG) formed from Company A, 5th SFGA, to train Cambodian national troops.

March 3 The 5th SFGA is withdrawn from RVN. The 6th SFGA at Ft Bragg is redesignated the 5th SFGA.

1972

April 30 MACV-SOG disbanded and STD Advisory Team 158 formed.

May 15 UITG redesignated Forces Armée Nationale Khmer (FANK).

November 30 FANK disbanded.

1973

January 15 US announces halt of all offensive ground action.

March 12 STD Advisory Team 158 disbanded.

March 29 Final US troops are withdrawn from RVN and MACV is disbanded.

SPECIAL FORCES IN VIETNAM

The US Army's first SF unit was the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) (SFGA). Formed at Ft Bragg, NC, in June 1952, its original role was rather different to that of SF in Vietnam a decade later. The 10th SFGA was an attempt to create a formalized unit that was tasked with guerrilla or unconventional warfare (UW), evasion and escape, and resistance. Its mission was to infiltrate communist Eastern Europe, sending in teams that would contact, organize, train, and assist guerrilla forces in disrupting the rear areas of Soviet forces in the event of an invasion of Western Europe.





It is often said that one of the reasons for the success of Special Forces is that they trained and fought like the enemy. In the top photo VC guerrillas plan an attack on a government outpost. In the bottom photo an A-team training in the US plan an attack on an “enemy” government installation.

To accomplish this task, the 10th SFGA hand-picked soldiers with experience in World War Two special operations units, ethnic Eastern Europeans, and young, motivated paratroopers. They employed the training methods of the World War Two Office of Strategic Services' (OSS) Jedburg Teams and the organizational concept of OSS Operational Groups. The 10th SFGA deployed to Germany in November 1953 to be in place for the feared invasion. At the same time, a second group was formed, the 77th (redesignated 7th SFGA in May 1960), and tasked with worldwide missions. In June 1957 the 1st SFGA was activated on Okinawa to conduct missions in Asia.

President Kennedy's concern over the increase in communist-inspired “wars of liberation,” led to the rapid expansion of SF. Since SF was trained to be guerrillas, what better force to charge with counterguerrilla warfare? Special Forces' role gradually shifted to assisting developing nations to combat the growing threat of “people's wars.” The 5th SFGA was activated at Ft Bragg on September 21, 1961 specifically to support increasing commitments to Southeast Asia.

The expansion of SF had inherent difficulties. Standards, in regards to the previous service experience of recruits, were lowered to some degree and new personnel had to be “mass produced” by the new SF Training Group.

SFTG was formed in 1963 along with the 3d, 6th, and 8th SFGAs, which were responsible for Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America respectively. To meet the growing need for SF troopers, first enlistment soldiers and second lieutenants were admitted for the first time.

Without the previous rigid selection criteria, the SF was now open to young, quality soldiers, who lacked experience, but who offered a high degree of enthusiasm. The expansion also brought substantial funding increases to support equipment development and acquisition, and individual and unit training.

In the early 1960s, seven Special Forces groups were conducting hundreds of mobile training team missions throughout the world to provide counterinsurgency training, civil affairs assistance, and instruction for foreign special operations units. Attention was increasingly focusing on the Republic of Vietnam and its rapidly growing insurgency.

To understand the SF soldier's Vietnam experience, a brief overview of SF organization, deployment, and development is first necessary. Special Forces' first experience in Vietnam took place in 1957, when a 77th SFGA detachment provided training for a group of commandos, who would eventually provide the cadre for their own special forces. In May 1960 the 1st and 7th SFGAs began to send teams to assist with Vietnamese commando training.



The muzzle flash of a 4.2in. M30 mortar illuminates the interior of its pit. This particular example is larger than usually found. The

exposed earth on the left side needs to be sandbagged before the wet season rains begin. Camp Thuong Duc, A-109, 1968.

In January 1960 President Kennedy had approved an all-encompassing counterinsurgency plan. In order to receive continued support, the Vietnamese Government and armed forces would undertake a broad range of reforms. In the meantime, the Central Intelligence Agency's US Programs Mission began developing several counterinsurgency programs among various ethnic minorities. These included the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG – referred to as “sidge”) for village defense (May 1961); Mountain Commandos (November 1961 – later Mountain Scouts); and Trailwatchers (June 1962, later Border Surveillance). These paramilitary organizations were not part of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN – referred to as “are-vin”). These programs, while administered by the CIA, were actually conducted by SF detachments.

Vietnam's ethnic and religious minorities, who often resided in remote areas, were generally ignored or mistreated by the Saigon Government. Prejudice from Vietnamese was considered by many minorities to be as big a threat as that offered by the Viet Cong (VC), the military arm of Vietnam's communist National Liberation Front. Supported by communist North Vietnam, the VC were quick to exploit these neglected groups. The CIA, backed by Special Forces, intended to expand Vietnamese Government presence, provide a means for the minorities to defend themselves, and bring them into the national struggle.

Early 1962 saw SF begin the training of Montagnards at Buon Enao in the central highlands. This successful experiment would ultimately lead to scores of CIDG camps throughout Vietnam. In November 1962, the piecemeal dispatch of SF teams to Vietnam was formalized with the establishment of US Army Special Forces, Vietnam (Provisional) (USASFV); in effect a miniature SF group. Prior to this, teams were attached to the Counterinsurgency Support Office. By the next year, USASFV had grown to a controlling C-team in Nha Trang, four B-teams (one in each corps area³), and 36 A-teams. Over 50,000 CIDG and other paramilitary troops participated in the various programs. The SF teams were located in remote, fortified camps and conducted six-month temporary duty (TDY) tours detached from the 1st, 5th, and 7th SFGAs. It was soon decided to concentrate the CIA's counterinsurgency programs under USASFV. Operation SWITCHBACK was initiated on July 1, 1963 to shift

these programmes to USSF control. The transition was completed in October 1964.



USSF and CIDG rush to off-load supplies from a UH-1H Huey atop Grand Summit Mountain where Mission Support Site Da Hang was established in 1968. Such sites served as forward bases from which to launch operations.



Close teamwork was necessary for effective operations and day-to-day running of the camp. Here the LLDB Camp Katum commander and the A-322 executive officer discuss known enemy dispositions via a combat interpreter.

In September 1964, USASFV was disbanded as the 5th SFGA relocated to Vietnam by phasing in its teams. The six-month tour became a thing of the past as individuals now conducted one-year tours. A team was assigned to a specific camp where it remained. As individuals completed their tours, their replacements arrived and it was not long before a continuous process of troopers departing and arriving became established. While the team cohesiveness of the old six-month tour offered distinct advantages, the new system ensured continuity of the advisory effort as there were always "old hands" in the teams, men who were familiar with the strike force and area of operations.

The primary missions of the camp strike forces were border security, infiltration trail interdiction, local village security, intelligence collection, and local civil action projects. Regardless of the various special projects and the strike force camps, the primary mission of the 5th Special Forces

Group in Vietnam was to advise the Vietnamese Airborne Special Forces (Luc Luong Dac Biêt – LLDB)⁴.

Special Forces organization

Special Forces unit organization was unique to the Army and, to the uninitiated, somewhat confusing. The primary unit to which SF soldiers identified was the Special Forces Group (Airborne). A group consisted of a Headquarters and Headquarters Company, a Signal Company, and four SF Companies (A–D). From 1963–65, some boasted an Aviation Company. A 250-man (approximately) company was divided into 16 SF operational detachments, or teams. Company headquarters (the C-team) was headed by a lieutenant-colonel while the three operational detachments (B-teams) were headed by majors (those in Vietnam were commanded by lieutenant-colonels from 1968). Both C- and B-teams had a complete staff, XO (executive officer), S-1 (personnel), S-2 (intelligence), S-3 (operations), S-4 (supply), and a communications officer. An S-5 (civil affairs) officer was added in Vietnam. Each officer had a senior NCO assistant, and both C- and B-teams possessed a sergeant-major. The B-team was additionally manned by the same NCO specialists as an A-team, increasing its capabilities. A C-team was manned by six officers and 12 NCOs; a B-team by six officers and 17 NCOs. There was also a company Administrative Detachment, two officers and 13 cooks, clerks, and other support personnel.

The company's 12 A-teams (four per B-team) were the core element of Special Forces. There were two men in each specialty, allowing the team to be split into two elements. As within any military organization, the use of official terms was often the exception. The commonly used duty position titles are given in parentheses:⁵

From 1968 most A-teams in Vietnam were increased to 14 men and modified to more effectively accomplish the counterinsurgency role. A 1st lieutenant Civic Action/Psychological Operations Officer (CA/PO Officer – pronounced “kay-poe”) and a specialist 5 CA/PO Specialist were added. The Demo Man was replaced by an Assistant Intelligence Sergeant. A-teams' rank structures were typically much lower than specified and usually understrength. The author, upon arrival at his team, found a full complement of officers, one master sergeant, two sergeants 1st class, one staff sergeant, and two sergeants. Shortages of medics and commo men were notoriously common.

Detachment Commander	Captain	Team Leader
Executive Officer	1st Lieut.	XO or jokingly, "Excess Officer"
Operations Sergeant	Master Sgt.	Team Sergeant
Heavy Weapons Leader	Sgt. 1st Cl.	Heavy Weapons Man
Intelligence Sergeant	Sgt. 1st Cl.	Intel Sergeant
Light Weapons Leader	Sgt. 1st Cl.	Light Weapons Man
Medical Specialist	Sgt. 1st Cl.	Senior or Team Medic
Radio Operator Supervisor	Sgt. 1st Cl.	Senior Radio Operator
Assistant Medical Specialist	Staff Sgt.	Junior Medic
Demolitions Sergeant	Staff Sgt.	Engineer Sgt.
Chief Radio Operator	Sgt.	Junior Radio Operator
Combat Demolitions Specialist	Spec. 5	Demo Man

The basic group structure was maintained by the 5th SFGA in Vietnam, but greatly modified and expanded. This flexibility to adapt to accommodate mission requirements is a keynote feature of SF organization.

By early 1968, the 5th SFGA's structure had stabilized, although minor changes continued to occur as camps opened and closed. The group maintained its Special Forces Operating Base (SFOB) at Nha Trang (II CTZ). The SFOB included the much expanded Group HQ and HQ Company, Company E (Signal) with detachments attached to C-teams, and the Logistical Support Center. Numerous Military Intelligence, Signal, and Engineer Detachments served with the SFOB and C-teams, with further attachments to the B-teams, which later increased to about 30 men. Nearby was the Vietnamese LLDB Command Headquarters.

Companies C, B, A, and D were responsible for USSF elements in I, II, III, and IV CTZs respectively. The company's C-teams were located near the Vietnamese Corps Headquarters and the parallel LLDB C-team. The C-team, while serving as a command and control headquarters for SF elements with the CTZ, mainly provided logistical support and liaison with US Army forces. The number of B-teams varied from the standard three to two or four. One B-team served as the MIKE Force command, while the others supported the A-teams at strike force camps. They were collocated

with an LLDB B-team in a province capital. Both the B- and C-teams were augmented with intelligence and communications personnel.



CIDG Strikers distribute fresh rations that have been delivered by a C-7A Caribou transport to Camp Katum, 1969. Across the border in Cambodia was a VC mortar training school and Katum, nicknamed "Ka-boom," was the target. By 1968 the camp had received some 22,000 mortar rounds, forcing its conversion to a completely underground installation.

Team numbering varied from group to group, but in Vietnam from 1965 it followed a simple system that identified the CTZ in which the team was located. The C-teams of Company C, B, A, and D were designated C-1, 2, 3, and 4 to match I, II, III, and IV CTZs; the system was, it must be said, a little confusing due to the order in which the companies had been assigned to corps areas. The companies, however, were seldom referred to as such, but simply as, for example, C-3. C-3's B-teams were B-32, 33, and 34. B-36 controlled the MIKE Force. Each B-team had four A-teams designated by three digit numbers, for example, B-33 controlled A-331 through 334.

Some eight B-teams, designated in the 50-series, were under 5th SFGA control. These supported the various special reconnaissance projects (B-50,

52, 53, 56, and 57), 5th MIKE Force (B-55), and LLDB Training Center (B-51).

SPECIAL FORCES TRAINING

Enlistment, initial training, and SF recruitment

Most future SF troopers had enlisted in the regular Army at a time when it was more popular for young Americans to join the National Guard or gain an educational or conscientious objector deferment. Many were airborne qualified prior to volunteering for SF. The three-week Airborne Course, (Jump School), at Ft Benning, Georgia, demanded high physical and performance standards. Men had to complete five qualifying jumps, but it was neither as tough nor dangerous as often portrayed.

There were several ways that servicemen came to volunteer for SF. Some men, based on records screening, were approached by SF recruiting NCOs while attending Basic Combat Training or the Airborne Course. SF recruiters had no quota and they actually attempted to discourage prospective volunteers. Others volunteered after two or more years' service; many men from the 82d or 101st Airborne Divisions chose this route. Servicemen who had been exposed to SF in-country during a Vietnam tour, were another source of recruits. While most enlisted volunteers were infantrymen, they could possess any military occupation specialty (MOS). Unusual non-combatant MOSSs were considered to provide SF troopers with a broader background when mixed with the predominating infantrymen.



An SF engineer NCO discusses the construction of a below-ground bunker with a Striker, Cung Son, A-221, 1969. Between combat operations, A-team members spent long hours working with the Strikers on camp construction and endless refurbishing projects.

The stipulation that enlisted men be triple volunteers – Army, Airborne, SF – like everything else in the Army, could be waived to accommodate qualified draftees. A soldier volunteering for the Army enlisted for three years and was designated Regular Army, his serial number prefixed by “RA.” An inducted soldier, a draftee, was called to the colors for two years, his serial number was preceded by “US.” In order to volunteer for SF, a draftee was required to extend his enlistment to three years or more and was redesignated “RA.” A soldier was required to have at least 18 months remaining on his enlistment once he completed SF training. RA volunteers enlisting in the Army to attend specific training courses would not attend that training if they joined SF.

Junior officers often faced an uphill battle to enter SF. All units during the Vietnam War were critically short of officers. Commanders were reluctant to lose good officers to the “Snake Eaters” and sternly warned hopefuls that an SF tour could adversely affect their careers. SF officers could be of any combat arms branch: Infantry, Armor, Field and Air Defense Artillery, Engineer, and Military Police. Military Intelligence, Signal, Medical, Quartermaster officers and others could be assigned to SF to fill certain support functions, and not all attended the SF Officer Course.

However, all were required to have completed their basic branch course before acceptance.

Both officers and enlisted men took the Army Physical Readiness Test (APRT), meeting airborne standards, and successfully completed the Combat Water Survival Test (CWST), a simple swimming test. Enlisted men had to additionally pass the mentally grueling Special Forces Selection Battery, which included personality, critical decision making, self-location (using a series of photos), and Morse code aptitude tests, which many men purposely failed in order to avoid a somewhat unpopular duty.

A common eight-week Basic Combat Training course was attended by all men entering the Army. It was conducted at one of 12 training centers (the number varied slightly over the war years) and provided a good foundation in basic military skills: physical fitness; dismounted drill; military customs and courtesies; bayonet and hand-to-hand combat; individual combat skills; first aid; and, most importantly, two weeks of rifle marksmanship. The use of grenades was the only other weapons training provided. “Basic” was followed by Advanced Individual Training (AIT) in one of scores of MOSSs offered at the training centers or one of over 20 branch or specialty schools. AIT could last from eight weeks to many months depending on the MOS. Light Weapons Infantry AIT (MOS 11B) was eight weeks at one of seven infantry training centers. All except Ft Dix, NJ, were rated as “Vietnam oriented.” Ft Dix was reserved for infantrymen slated for Germany, Korea, Alaska, and Panama. Infantry AIT covered squad tactics, combat and reconnaissance patrolling, land navigation, radio-telephone procedures, mine warfare, more physical fitness instruction, and three weeks of machine gun, automatic rifle, 40mm grenade launcher, and antitank weapons training. BCT and 11B AIT called for 10–14 hours a day, five days a week, with Saturdays dedicated to inspections and administration.



Two SF engineer NCOs cut a length of detonating cord to prepare demolition materials in order to clear trees hampering the approach to Camp Duc Hue's A-325 airfield. One man carries an M1 rifle with an M2 flash hider.

Special Forces training

Once accepted, the future SF trooper was sent to the US Army John F. Kennedy Center for Special Warfare (Airborne), which was identified by the awkward abbreviation of USAJFKCSW (ABN). The fact that it was the only organization within the Army that bore an individual's name was an indicator that it was different to anything experienced elsewhere in the Army. The SF student was expected to be on time for daily classes, but he was not marched there in formation. Once released from his training company's morning formation, he was on his own. After a week's

processing, the student was assigned to one of the four training companies in Special Forces Training Group (SFTG). Often he would have to wait several weeks before being assigned a class date. In the meantime he pulled KP (Kitchen Police), guard duty, and other work details to include roadside trash pick-up; it was a humbling experience. This was to take place between all phases of SF training. But one of the details was sought after, and proved to be of benefit to his training. Groups of Special Forces students awaiting their next phase were employed as “guerrillas” (Gs) to be trained by other students or “counter-guerrillas” (CGs) to act as an aggressor force in field exercises during the different training phases. It was considered a lot of fun to chase someone or even be chased through the woods for a week or two, especially when it spared one from KP, formations, and inspections.

Phase I of the Special Forces Tactics and Techniques Course was of only four weeks’ duration. Students came from throughout the Army. Some had volunteered to flee boring Stateside assignments, others had completed an overseas tour and sported spec. 4 or sergeant stripes, a small handful had even been to Vietnam, but most were privates and PFCs with only Basic, AIT and Jump School under their belts. All were eager to meet the challenges of this new adventure.

The first class in Phase I was a math refresher, much to our student’s surprise. But, the rest of the course concentrated on patrolling techniques, land navigation, basic survival, and methods of instruction. The teaching role assumed paramount importance. He found out that the Special Forces soldier was a teacher first and commando second. All of the hands-on instruction was given by NCOs, many with two or three tours in Vietnam behind them, and their years of practical experience were passed on to the student. The student himself taught progressively longer classes on a broad range of military subjects to his own group and was required to make his own training aids. The summation of the course was the Phase I Field Training Exercise (FTX), a week-long ordeal at Camp Mackall, southwest of Ft Bragg. After making a night jump into the dense pine forests, classes of 50 or more students conducted demanding, around the clock land navigation exercises, ambushes, reconnaissance patrols and raids, all with virtually no food and while enthusiastically hounded by the “CGs” – other students. Severely deprived of food and sleep the entire week, a grueling 20km-plus evasion and escape course followed. Upon completion of this phase he was awarded the green beret in a simple ceremony, but he was still

a long way from being Special Forces qualified. The 1st Special Forces crest adorned his beret, but no unit flash was authorized.



MEDCAP (Medical and Civil Affairs Program) was a standard mission for all SF camps. Local villagers would visit the strike camps and patrols would visit outlying villages in their tactical area of responsibility, thereby providing the only medical care the villagers had ever received.

Another break in training followed, bringing with it work details and speculation as to what SF MOS course he might draw during Phase II. An interview by an officer determined the soldier's MOS, but it was preceded by the warning, "Tell me which MOS you want and I'll tell you why you can't have it." All enlisted men were trained in one of five skills. Officers were trained separately in the 12-week Special Forces Officer Course (SFOC). Each of the MOS courses, except the medical, ended with a week-long FTX to practice new found skills. The officers undertook a two-week unconventional warfare FTX known as Exercise Gobbler Woods.

The ten-week Engineer Course (MOS 12B) covered conventional and unconventional (home-made) explosives (a week of each); demolition techniques; obstacles; light building and bridge construction; and engineer reconnaissance. The course's highlight was to build a bridge one week and blow it up the next. Most went on to heavy equipment operator training at Ft Belvior, Virginia, the Engineer School.

The eight-week Weapons Course was divided into light and heavy weapons phases. The five-week light weapons portion (MOS 11B) trained the student to operate and disassemble some 55 small arms. Timed disassembly and assembly tests were frequent. Current and obsolete US, Allied, and Communist Bloc weapons were studied along with basic small unit tactics. The two-week heavy weapons (MOS 11C) portion dealt with 57mm and 106mm recoilless rifles, the LAW and 3.5in. rocket launcher, and mortars, predominantly on the 60mm, 81mm, and 4.2in. mortars, as well as fire direction center operations. After a one-week tactical exercise and live firing of all weapons, graduates were awarded both MOSSs.



The CIDG crew of a newly issued 105mm M101A1 howitzer completes a training session under the guidance of A-245's weapons NCO. Many camps were provided with two of the howitzers as they were so remote that Allied artillery support was not always available. Dak Seang, 1969.

In the 12-week Operations and Intelligence (O&I) Course (MOS 11F) for NCOs, students were required to be at least sergeants. They were taught the many aspects of mission planning, and unconventional warfare and special operations intelligence techniques. The skills learned ranged from photography, fingerprinting, and briefing procedures, to establishing agent nets.

The 16-week Communications Course (MOS 05B) covered operation of specialized radios and burst-transmission message devices, on- and off-line

cryptographic systems, clandestine commo techniques, and special emphasis on manual Morse code. The SF standard was to send and receive 18 words per minute, the highest standard in the US armed forces, with the exception of nuclear submarine communicators, who operated at 20 wpm.

The extremely challenging 32-week Medical Course (MOS 91C) was conducted in four sub-phases. The first was an eight-week Special Forces Basic Aidman's Course (MOS 91A), which was modified from the regular course with more emphasis on tropical diseases and less on ward care. This was followed by attendance on the 12-week Clinical Specialist Course (MOS 91C) at Ft Sam Houston, Texas, the Army's Medical Training Center. From there, students spent six-weeks "internship" at an Army hospital working in emergency rooms and wards. They returned to Bragg for the most challenging portion of the course: the Medical Aid Procedures Course, which was unique to Special Forces medics and taught students skills normally reserved for physicians. The six weeks began with three weeks' clinical training followed by "Dog Lab," where each student received a dog that was treated the same as a human patient. After being cured of existing ailments, the "patient" was anesthetized and shot in a hind leg with a .22cal rifle, which was treated and another leg later amputated.⁶ The graduates of this most demanding of Special Forces MOSs were highly respected by the other troops and Army surgeons. The civilian position of physician's assistant (PA) was originally created to utilize the skills of former SF medics.

An interesting aspect of the Training Group was that the students were intermixed within companies regardless of MOS and training phase. All the various MOSs might be represented within a single eight-man room. It was a situation that, when coupled with a variety of previous military training, led to a great deal of unofficial cross-fertilization of skills. The practice was, however, eliminated in late 1968 when students were concentrated into companies by phase and MOS. The change undoubtedly eased administration, but informal professional development suffered.

Now with a new MOS, the student was assigned to a group of students that possessed all SF MOSs to undertake Phase III. It was here that the student was taught the basics of unconventional warfare operations: concepts, techniques, organization, mission planning, air support, low-level tradecraft, and more. He learned the nature of guerrillas, how to deal with them, how to organize them, and to motivate them to undertake missions

that were beneficial to the military and political goals of the US and its allies, rather than the guerrilla's own, frequently shortsighted, aims. He was also taught how to demobilize a guerrilla force once a conflict was over.



Besides medical treatment, MEDCAP missions also distributed food, clothes, tools, and agricultural materiel. Here A-246's civic action/psychological operations (CA/PO) officer distributes clothing to needy Montagnards near Camp Mang Buk.

The final two weeks of the six-week phase was spent in an unconventional warfare exercise. Students planned and prepared for the mission, then parachuted into Uwharrie National Forest northwest of Ft Bragg. Each student A-team linked up with its "guerrilla" force (made up of instructor-led SF students). The student A-teams organized and trained the "Gs," and then assisted them in the execution of raids, ambushes, and other missions while pursued by the "CGs," often provided by the 82d Airborne Division during this phase. The trust of the guerrilla leaders had to be gained but they often proved uncooperative and had to be persuaded to undertake some missions. Upon graduation from Phase III the student was

now considered “flash-qualified” (authorized to sew his assigned group’s flash on his beret) and had an “S” special skill identifier tacked on to the end of his MOS. Officers were designated by a “3” skill identifier. From 1969, the SF Qualification Course was rated as an NCO course, and graduating enlisted men were automatically promoted to sergeant (E5). Previously they had to work their way through the ranks.

The words of Berry Saddler’s “Ballad of the Green Berets,” which says: “One hundred men we’ll test today, but only one will win the green beret,” are not entirely accurate, but it was a demanding program with an extremely high attrition rate. Counting the pre-screening and selection battery tests, one out of 100 may well have been the end success rate.

The new Special Forces trooper was now assigned to an SF group, the 3d, 6th or 7th at Ft Bragg, 1st on Okinawa, 8th in Panama, or the 10th in Germany.⁷ Small numbers were selected for assignment to the 46th SF Company in Thailand. Most of the graduating E4s and E5s were placed directly in E6 and E7 A-team positions. Many of those remaining at Bragg were eventually destined for Vietnam. The training actually never ended; it was continued in the groups by unit-level training, exercises, and attendance at specialized courses. Even when our trooper arrived in Vietnam, he undertook the two-week Combat Orientation Course at the Special-Forces-run MACV Recondo School. Contrary to popular perception, few of the new troopers were taught a foreign language or cross-trained in a second MOS. This was usually reserved for those who re-enlisted.



The senior medic of A-334 and the LLDB team commander enter into a friendly competition with their favorite handguns, an M1911A1 pistol and an M1917 revolver, both .45cal, at Camp Tong Le Chon.

The new Special Forces troopers were by no means supermen, but they were trained to a high degree of proficiency, were extremely motivated, mentally and physically fit for the rigors ahead, and possessed an innate desire to accomplish the Special Forces motto, *De Oppresso Liber* (Free the Oppressed).

Deployment to Vietnam

The SF soldier selected for Vietnam duty was notified by the Department of the Army 120 days in advance by receipt of his alert orders. Those volunteering for Vietnam, a feat accomplished by a phone call to the

Department of the Army's Special Assignments Section, often had a longer delay as they had to await vacancies in the next available allotment. In the meantime, the trooper undertook a pre-deployment physical, received numerous inoculations, took care of any dental work (none was available in Vietnam except for severe emergencies), completed a will, granted power of attorney to next of kin, and took a 30-day leave. His deployment orders directed that he report to either Ft Lewis, Washington, or Port of Embarkation, San Francisco, California. He spent a week there completing paperwork and received an issue of tropical uniforms.⁸ Regular troops were required to possess at least one field cap (baseball cap), and if not in possession of one, they had to purchase one at Quartermaster Clothing Sales. SF soldiers were not required to have one; and they became a clothing item that no self-respecting trooper would be caught with. They did, however, rush to on-post dry cleaners to have name and "U.S. ARMY" tapes sewn on their new jungle fatigues at their own expense. Only the SF knew what unit they were going to, and they had their "Lightning Bolt" patch and jumpwings sewn on. Between processing, the days were spent on post work details and the evenings at enlisted or NCO clubs. The flight to Vietnam was on a chartered commercial Boeing 707 with all the usual airline amenities, and it took the better part of a day.

Most SF troops processed through Ft Lewis arrived at Cam Ranh Bay in II CTZ and the 22d Replacement Battalion. Those from California arrived at Tan Son Nut Air Base in Saigon and went on to the 90th Replacement. More paperwork awaited them on arrival, including filling out next-of-kin notification cards. A soldier could specify that his next of kin not be notified if he was lightly wounded (most did this); regulations required that they be notified if seriously wounded, killed, or reported missing. Soldiers were also issued a Geneva Convention Card and MACV Ration Card (to control the purchase of electrical appliances, cameras, liquor, and cigarettes as a black market control measure). American dollars were exchanged for Military Payment Certificates (MPCs), which were the standard medium of exchange in Vietnam. Our trooper brushed his teeth with a special one-time use fluoridated toothpaste, was cautioned on the danger of venereal diseases, and sternly briefed on the necessity of taking all of his daily and weekly anti-malaria pills. The conventional soldiers were assigned to units and after a few days were shipped out. The SF soldiers were even sooner flown to the SFOB at Nha Trang and began another round of paperwork.



In order for the Air Force to get accurate and timely weather information from the remote interior of Vietnam, many SF camps were provided with a weather kit and required to take thrice-daily readings on weather conditions and radio them in. While a source of jokes and a mild inconvenience, the reports were extremely valuable to the Air Force. A somewhat relaxed standard of footwear is seen at Camp Tra Bong, A-107.

Troops in Vietnam were paid in Military Payment Certificates. It was a violation of regulations to even possess US dollars or spend MPCs on the local economy. MPCs could be spent in post exchanges (PX), military clubs, Army post offices, and authorized Vietnamese concessionaires on bases (barbers, tailors, etc.) American car dealers also had salesmen on major rear bases. A soldier could select his car (the next year's model), arrange for payroll deductions, and pick up his new car when he returned to

the States (if he were killed the payments made would be reimbursed to his next of kin). MPCs were to be exchanged for Vietnamese piasters at military pay offices and banks at a rate of US \$1.00 = 115\$ VN (115 piasters or ‘Pees’) in 1969. Troops were cautioned not to exchange dollars or MPCs for piasters on the black market, where they received a substantially better exchange rate, up to 200 percent. Most soldiers had a percentage of their pay deducted and banked in checking or savings accounts. The First National City and Chase Manhattan Banks had branch offices in Saigon offering 10 percent interest on savings accounts, higher than the Stateside standard. Money could also be sent home by postal money order obtained from Army post officers.

In 1969, an SF sergeant (E5) on his first tour had a monthly base pay of about \$350 to which were added \$65 hostile fire (combat) pay, \$55 hazardous duty (jump) pay,⁹ \$77.10 subsistence allowance (rations not available pay), and \$13 overseas allowance (no one could figure out what it was really for); all tax exempt in Vietnam. Letters home were free, but packages had to be paid for.

After processing through the 5th SFGA, the newly arrived SF trooper was attached to the Combat Orientation Course (COC or “Cock Course”) under the tutelage of the MACV Recondo School, which was operated by the 5th SFGA. While awaiting the next course to begin, he was free to explore Nha Trang, to become familiar with Vietnamese culture, and to exchange the US dollars he had “forgotten” to declare for black market piasters. Restaurants, bars, steam baths, and tailor shops served as cultural classrooms. Wherever he looked he saw the three most common features in Vietnam: sandbags, barbed wire, and motorbikes.



One of the precepts of SF is that everybody works together, pulling their load regardless of rank. That was extended to the CIDG, to serve as an example. SF troopers commonly worked alongside their Strikers sharing the same privations and labor. Here an A-326 sergeant first class at Camp Tra Cu leads a work detail to a site where a new weapons bunker will be constructed.

Upon completing the COC our trooper received his assignment and within 48 hours he was on his way to some far corner of Vietnam. His first stop would be the C-team, where a small group would spend a few days awaiting transport to their B-team. The trooper would meet the company commander and sergeant-major, receive a briefing from the S-2, S-3, and S-5 sections, and draw an M16A1 rifle. When he arrived at the B-team by helicopter or air transport, much the same process would be repeated and he would find out which camp he would be spending the next year at.

SPECIAL FORCES CAMP

No two Strike Force camps were alike, although there were many similarities. The early camps were somewhat crude, and living conditions spartan. Buildings were constructed of local logs and thatch, scrounged corrugated metal, scrap lumber, and ammo crates. Weak defenses consisted of a few machine-gun bunkers, light-mortar pits, a surrounding trench or berm (earth wall), punji stakes, some barbed wire, and occasionally a moat.

In the mid-1960s the camps began to be “hardened,” after some remote camps were overrun, and were termed “fighting camps.” Allocations of machine guns, mortars, and recoilless rifles were greatly increased. Trench-connected bunkered fighting positions were improved, and masses of barbed and concertina wire were made available. Other amenities began to appear, such as power generators, refrigerators (for medicine, fresh food, and beer), and movie projectors (for CIDG morale). The camp’s perimeter was usually dictated by terrain, and it could be of almost any shape. The exact siting of a camp took into account soil conditions, drainage, location of villages, suitable airfield site, use of existing terrain features, and the location of dominating terrain features that would be of use to the enemy.

The camps were usually located in remote areas, often in regions where ARVN and US units seldom ventured. First-tier camps established on the Cambodian and Laotian borders were tasked with border surveillance and interdiction missions. Those in the second tier, further into the interior of Vietnam, were situated so as to interdict infiltration trails and conduct area combat reconnaissance. Many of the camps were also responsible for protecting nearby villages.

The camps were major construction projects taking months to build at a cost approaching \$1 million. Army engineers and Navy construction battalions (Seabees) accomplished much of the major construction, with the CIDG undertaking lighter work, installing the barrier wire, building perimeter bunkers and mortar pits, filling thousands of sandbags, and even constructing their own quarters.



An A-111 SF weapons NCO loads 23/4in. helicopter rockets into a makeshift rocket launcher mounted on a ½ton trailer. It is just one of many examples of expedient weapons concocted at SF camps. Camp Plateau Gi, 1967.

Touring a camp

The best way for a newly assigned A-team member to become familiar with a strike force camp was to follow an orientation tour conducted by an older hand. To this end, and because of his familiarity with it, the author's own camp (Chi Linh) is described below.

Chi Linh Camp was established in January 1967 as Camp Cau Song Be ("Song River Bridge"), but it was soon renamed to prevent confusion with B-34's Song Be Camp and because the bridge was blown by the VC. It was located about 11 miles southeast of An Loc, the capital of Binh Long Province and location of B-33. Located on the north side of Interprovincial Route 14 (closed due to the destruction of all bridges and culverts, thereby cutting off the camp from Chon Thanh the district capital to the west), it was 1.8 miles west of the Song Be River and 56 miles north of Saigon.

The camp was established by USSF Team A-333 and LLDB-team (*Toán*) A-162, to interdict part of an infiltration trail known as "Serge's Jungle Highway," an off-shoot of the Ho Chi Minh Trail running through Cambodia, 25 miles to the northwest. The camp had been built directly on the trail, resulting in a serious real-estate dispute, but once the camp was completed it was left in relative peace and the NVA re-routed the trail 3-4

miles east of the Song Be River in Phouc Long Province. It remained the CSF's principal interdiction mission.

Chi Linh was an octagonal camp about 220yds across. It was built on flat ground in an area of gently rolling hills. The camp was surrounded by dense bamboo growth interspersed with small patches of hardwood timber and brush.

Chi Linh was securely surrounded by an impressive array of wire obstacles. Beginning at the outermost barrier and working inward through 110yds of obstacles, we find that there are five belts, and two types of wire. Standard military barbed wire, not unlike its civilian equivalent, was issued in spools. Concertina wire – spring steel wire – was wound in a coil 3ft in diameter, one coil giving a 50ft length when stretched out. Wire was supported by olive drab-painted U-shaped picket posts, which were issued in several lengths.



An example of an earth berm on a camp perimeter. Besides providing defensive positions, this berm at Camp My An in the Mekong Delta also served to keep out flood waters during the wet season. The camp would literally become an island when the monsoon rains came. This perimeter machine-gun bunker was built high enough to stay above the water.

Between belts 2, 3, and 4 was "tanglefoot," a spider web arrangement of barbed wire strung at heights of 6in., 12in., and 18in. above the ground and secured to short pickets and barrier posts. Its purpose was to trip assaulting troops and make it more difficult to low-crawl through. Belts 1, 2 and 3 and the tanglefoot had M49A1 tripflares emplaced.

Between belts 2 and 3 were emplaced M18A1 Claymore anti-personnel mines (see [Plate D](#)); about 600 guarded Chi Linh's wire. Some of these mines could be fired in banks of six from switchboards in the command bunker; the others were individually command-fired from perimeter machine-gun bunkers, where the firing devices were secured in clusters.

Belts 1 and 3 followed the eight-sided shape of the camp; the others traced a zig-zag pattern. The distance between the belts varied. The barriers were high in order to discourage the use of scaling ladders and bamboo mats. The greatest danger was posed by enemy sappers – specially trained soldiers whose task was to infiltrate through the wire, cutting a path and clearing mines and tripflares for the assault force. No height or thickness of barrier could stop them, and the only defense was constant vigilance. The quality of wire used in such a camp barrier system was phenomenal, requiring thousands of coils of concertina.

A sandbag parapet about 2ft high and 3½ft thick was constructed on the outer edge of the perimeter trench. It was capped with approximately 2in. of concrete, which was employed not for ballistic protection, but to prevent deterioration by weather and personnel. Individual firing positions – which were dug into the outer side of the 4ft-deep, 3½ft-wide trench – were cut into the parapet so that its top provided overhead cover, and each had a small firing port. There were about 30 such positions along each of the eight walls. Centered in each wall and at each corner were a total of 16 machine-gun bunkers. Each of these bunkers, which were constructed of concrete-capped sandbags, had a tripod-mounted .30cal M1919A6 machine gun, and three of them mounted two guns. A sandbagged guard post (complete with a corrugated steel roof) was perched atop each bunker.



Camp Lang Vei was fortunate enough to acquire a .50cal M55 quad machine gun. The camp was, however, frequently attacked by the NVA and in February 1968 it was overrun with the aid of PT-76 tanks. This picture of the USSF A-101 and LLDB team sergeants was taken in July 1967.

Behind the perimeter trench were quarters for the 394 troops and almost an equal number of their family dependants. At some camps the dependants lived in a nearby village, requiring a permanent security force to guard them. The quarters were built of sandbagged walls with floors sunk about 2ft below ground level. Roofs were supported by timbers and covered with at least two layers of sandbags, topped with corrugated metal anchored with sandbags. Each of three CSF companies had a corrugated metal headquarters building. Other principal structures included a well-equipped dispensary, a vehicle maintenance facility, a schoolhouse for the Strikers' children, a camp store, the *Co Lac Bo* (combined recreation room and café), a tailor shop, and a barber shop. Most of these buildings were made from scrap wood with corrugated metal roofs.

A portion of the camp's northeast and east interior was occupied by an artillery platoon detached from the 5th ARVN Infantry Division. This platoon, with two 105mm M101A1 howitzers, was rotated every six

months. Similar 105mm howitzers (often referred to simply as “one-oh-fives”) were supplied to many camps in an effort to provide more widespread artillery coverage. Some camps’ “one-oh-fives” were manned by specially trained Strikers.

At Chi Linh the howitzers were emplaced in heavily sandbagged positions with adjoining ammunition bunkers. The platoon had its own quarters, fire direction center, and supply room. The howitzers were of limited use for camp defense, due to their inability to deliver direct fire, and were used primarily to support CSF combat operations; their 12,000yd range covered most of the camp’s TAOR - The Tactical Area of Responsibility was the permanent area assigned to a Strike Force camp for tactical operations. A Group directive specified that artillery be emplaced to fire directly into the wire with “beehive” rounds (flechet projectiles) if camp layout permitted it.



A CIDG 105mm howitzer crew demonstrate their crew drill to the 5th SF Command Readiness Team. The CRT visited each camp once or twice a year to evaluate its performance and combat readiness as well as make recommendations for improvements. To the right of the SF NCO are LLDB officers in olive-green and leaf-pattern uniforms.

Dispersed at intervals around the troop area were nine 60mm M19 mortars. The interior of the above-ground pits was about 8ft across; the sandbag sides were 3ft high and 2ft thick. Each had an attached ammunition bunker. Visitors were surprised that any given mortar did not fire into the perimeter section closest to it, but instead was directed across the camp into a sector on the far side. This was because the pits on the side attacked might be under direct fire and the minimum range was 55yds. The mortar fire needed to be brought down close during an attack on the wire.

Additional fire support could be obtained from US fire support bases located to the north, south and west, in the form of 8in. and 155mm howitzers and 175mm guns. Close air support and flare ships could be on station from Ben Hoa Air Base in 20 minutes, and 1st Cavalry Division attack helicopters would follow shortly. A curtain of fire could be placed around the camp, but in such cases the VC/NVA, being the soldiers they were, could sometimes still get through.

An inner perimeter, capable of holding out even if the rest of the camp was overrun, was added to all camps that did not already have them in the mid-1960s. Chi Linh's was square in shape, with a slope-fronted, 5ft-high earth berm, which was about 8ft thick at its base. The inside was vertical and supported by corrugated metal or steel drums (with the ends removed, slit open and flattened) held in place by barbed wire posts. Numerous coils of concertina wire were strung on the berm's outer face.

Inside were the USSF and LLDB team houses and quarters, supply and arms rooms, interpreters' quarters, a wash house with showers, two main ammunition bunkers, underground communications and emergency medical bunkers, and two 10Kw power generators. The above-ground structures had either wood or corrugated metal sides and corrugated metal roofs. Earth-filled 55gal. drums protected the exterior of the team houses.

Emplaced into the perimeter were three 81mm M29 (see Plate E3) and one 4.2in. M30 mortars, in large sunken pits walled with concrete-capped sandbags. Inner perimeter machine-gun bunkers served a dual role. One was situated on each corner and midway on the walls (apart from the northeast wall and east corner, which had none), and each housed one or two M1919A6s. Some bunkers also mounted weapons on their roofs that were capable of firing into the camp's outer wire; these included three 57mm M18A1 recoilless rifles and one .50cal HB-M2 machine gun. Another .50cal was mounted on a 12ft tower near the northeast wall, which

was referred to as the “CMH-Tower” (an allusion to the certainty of a posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor for anyone who tried to climb up during an attack).

There was only one entrance to the camp: a road running from the south wall to the airstrip. On the west side of the entrance road was the POL (petroleum, oil, lubricants) dump surrounded by upright earth-filled drums. A small guard shack stood near the outer barrier belt. Before sunset the entrance was secured by several sets of wood frame and barbed wire gates, plus half a dozen coils of concertina pulled across the road and rigged with Claymores and tripflares.



In 1969 many camps were provided with 106mm M40A1 recoilless rifles in light of the increased NVA armor threat, although some camps already possessed them. Besides its intended role, the “106” was effective for direct anti-personnel fire and was frequently used for long-range harassing fire. This rifle is located at Camp Ba Xoai, A-421. Behind it is a 5,000,000-candlepower exon searchlight used to detect targets on the nearby Nui Cam Mountain.

The most noticeable manmade feature outside the camp was a 3,500ft airstrip. The east-west runway was constructed directly on Route 14, which provided a substantial foundation. The packed laterite (a red, coarse, gravelly soil) was tested to a compactness of 94 percent of concrete and it could handle any aircraft up to and including C-130s. There were turnaround pads on the east and west sides of the camp, the latter doubling

as a heli-pad. Across the runway was a small rifle range; near it was a demolitions pit where defective, dud, climate-deteriorated, and captured munitions were blown up. A village, Son La, stood just over 1½ miles to the east. Its population was about 300 friendly Stieng Montagnards, and it was the only remaining populated place in Chi Linh's TAOR.

The foregoing is only an example of one type of camp. Construction materials varied, as did perimeter defenses and construction styles. In the mountainous I CTZ, camps were perched on hill tops or clung on mountain sides. Some camps built near the Cambodian border, across from NVA sanctuaries, were completely underground due to being used as mortar crew training targets. Floating camps, which were common in IV CTZ's inundated Mekong Delta, were constructed of bunkers and mortar position built up on mounds and floating buildings that would rest on the ground when the flood waters receded.

Camp life

Daily routine in most strike force camps was normally slow paced, even idyllic at times. There were of course many exceptions, such as in areas infested with the VC, or close to contested border areas, or when the tempo of local combat operations picked up. A company making contact in the field increased activity as reinforcements were launched, air and artillery strikes coordinated, medevacs requested, and ammunition resupplies loaded on borrowed helicopters. The apprehension in the camp could be felt as wives and children, Strikers, LLDB, and USSF alike grew concerned over family and friends.

In many camps, however, life was quiet and slow paced for long periods. Companies rotated on tactical operations, local security patrols were sent out, guards were mounted, and training occasionally undertaken. The dependants cooked, cleaned their quarters, washed clothes, and went on with daily life. The children went to the camp school and the SF medics treated everyone's illnesses and injuries.

Work details were daily events and took up much of the Strikers' time in camp: filling sandbags, rebuilding and improving bunkers and other fortifications, clearing weeds from the wire, trash collection, water trailer runs to a nearby stream, pumping water from the camp well and filling 55gal. drums throughout the camp, and so forth. All of the SF soldiers had their own pet projects they concentrated on. Improving camp defenses and

the life of the Strikers, their families, and local villagers' lot were the main focuses.



The background of this well-built CIDG-manned 105mm howitzer position provides an excellent example of the general appearance of a typical CIDG camp, here Camp Bu Dop, A-341. Camps were a mix of new construction and rundown structures, some of crude appearance. The gun position's sides are revetted by olive-drab steel airfield planking. The World War-Two-style pierced landing matting was also used.

The work day began at 0600 hours with company role call and work detail assignments. The SF soldier on the last radio watch awoke his teammates. Radio watch was a two-hour shift conducted by all team members regardless of rank and was maintained 24 hours a day. An AN/VRC-47, located in the team house, monitored two channels, one on the B-team net along with the three other A-teams, and the tactical net on which the camp's company in the field communicated. Breakfast was served to all present team members by the hired cooks and they soon dispersed to discharge their duties.

Special Forces were not issued government rations, but each trooper received a monthly subsistence allowance. The food was actually scrounged

or traded from US units at bases, with frozen and canned food (B-rations) acquired by team members making monthly trips to these bases. A 1/4-ton jeep and trailer was borrowed from C-team in which to make the rounds. The scrounged food was stored in refrigerators and freezers provided for this purpose at the C-team and flown out to the camp the next day by an Air Force CV-2 Caribou transport. The camps had a few refrigerators and chest-type freezers. Since tiger-stripe uniforms and Montagnard crossbows were much-sought-after bartering goods, the teams usually ate well, though there were times of shortages. The lack of government rations also applied to field rations.

Engineers and weapons men oversaw (and participated in) the construction and repair of buildings, bunkers, and defenses. They also conducted tactical and weapons training, and oversaw the maintenance of crew-served weapons. The medics ran sick call for the Strikers and dependants, conducted MEDCAPs to nearby villages, trained CIDG medics, and spent a great deal of time on camp sanitation matters. The commo men hid away in their air-conditioned communications bunker, from where they repaired radios, processed messages received by courier from higher headquarters, and constantly tinkered with camp radio antennas, internal telephone systems, the power network, and generators. Everyone was involved in training from time to time and all shared the never ending paperwork.



There were few A-teams that did not possess several pets, which, in Vietnam, ranged from scarce cats to pythons. Dogs were universally the favorite and were considered part of the team. In the background is Camp Thuong Duc's, A-109, concrete-capped commo bunker. The layer of concrete, which is probably 2in. thick, served to protect the sandbag bunker from the elements rather than add additional protection.

The team was assisted in its duties by a number of civilian employees paid for through a special fund. These included a couple of cooks, mechanics to maintain vehicles and generators, a school teacher, an armorer, and a nurse or two. In an effort to provide some degree of employment for camp dependants, the team paid out of their own pockets for housekeepers, assistant cooks, and laundresses.

Combat interpreters, three or four per camp, were also civilian employees, but were paid for from other special funds. Close friendships frequently developed between team members and interpreters who were usually considered part of the team. A good interpreter, proficient in

English, capable of maintaining good relations with the LLDB, and effective in the field was worth his weight in gold. He would have to be protected from pirating by another team, especially if living conditions were better at another camp and the threat from the local VC not as great. Camps in highly contested areas had a difficult time attracting interpreters.

Relations with the LLDB counterpart team varied greatly, ranging from a close-working relationship to open hostility. Fortunately, the latter case was rare. While the LLDB had complete authority over the CIDG and the Americans were only advisors, working relationships evolved and varied greatly from camp to camp. The LLDB tended to oversee day-to-day camp administration, while the Americans controlled combat operations to a large degree. The Americans could easily manage events in the strike force, as they controlled funding, rations, supplies, and materials.

Work and training were halted at 1100 hours when “pok time” (*ngutrua*) was taken during the heat of the day. Lunch for the SF troops was sandwiches and a soft drink. Work resumed at 1300 hours and went on until 1700 hours. Dinner was simple and might be followed by a couple of beers or soft drinks while watching the sunset from atop bunkers. Two or three nights a week the Americans and LLDB would watch 16mm movies in the US team house; war movies and westerns were always popular with both Americans and Strikers. There was a television set in the US and LLDB team houses and at least one in each company area. In all but the most remote areas, the Armed Forces Television Network and a couple of Vietnamese stations could be picked up with elaborate antenna arrays erected by the commo men.



SF NCO and Strikers replace a bunker destroyed in an attack, Camp Dac Hue, A-325. Distorted airfield landing planks and timbers from the destroyed bunker are in the foreground. Some of those materials will be reused in the new bunker. Olive-drab U-shaped barbed wire pickets brace the new sandbag walls.

Dances and firelight dinner parties (*bua chen*), which are best described as food orgies, were occasionally conducted by the Strikers and happily attended by the USSF and LLDB. Most of the SF troopers became involved to some degree in the daily life of Strikers and their families by teaching in the school, providing English lessons, helping to improve living conditions on their own time, and aiding the medics in everything from suturing minor cuts to delivering babies. One rule was strictly adhered to, no relations with local women ... ever.

Twice a week the “work chopper” (Whisky Charley) would arrive at the camp, dropping off mail, movies (rotated between camps), and official correspondence. In-coming replacements, those going on R & R or returning, those making visits to the B- and C-teams, and those finishing their tours all traveled via the Whisky Charley. It would make two trips on the day it came, going between the B-team and all A-team camps before returning to the C-team.

Rations, ammunition, and spare parts arrived by C-130 or CV-2 transports. The few camps without an airstrip were resupplied by overland convoys or even air drop (the motion picture *Dumbo Drop* was loosely based on fact). Once a month the camp's payroll was delivered. A pay officer from the C-team paid the Americans in MPC and the CIDG payroll was delivered to the team commander. A pay formation was held and the Strikers were paid in piasters by the team commander, not the LLDB.

Local diversions were few. Invariably there was a basketball net, and volley ball and soccer matches were played with the Strikers (the play was rough and rules were lax, being referred to as "jungle rules"). Poker, the card game of choice, and reading were the main off-duty interests. Every US soldier in Vietnam was authorized a five-day out-of-country rest and recreation leave¹⁰ (non-chargeable to his annual 30 days' leave) plus an in-country three-day R & R at Vung Tau (III CTZ) or China Beach in Da Nang (I CTZ). Bangkok and Sydney were the most popular R & R centers among SF, although many married men often met their wives in Hawaii. Few SF bothered with the in-country R & R, having occasional opportunity to let off stream at the modest B- or C-team clubs.



A USSF officer inspects the Danish Madsen 9mm M/50 submachine guns of a platoon of Rhade Montagnard Mountain

Scouts. Some in the left-rear are armed with .30cal M1903 rifles. With their weapons concealed in back-pack baskets they would scout mountain trails posing as food gathers to report VC activities. Note the officer's World-War-Two-era jungle boots.

WEAPONS OF THE SPECIAL FORCES SOLDIER

Special Forces and the CIDG used a wide range of weapons dating from before World War Two to the latest available. Most of the older weapons initially issued to the CIDG were obtained from Army and CIA contingency stocks. SF and CIDG missions demanded weapons suitable for light-infantry operations, reconnaissance, and camp defense in widely different types of terrain. Reliability, simple operation, and light weight were the main prerequisites. The latter was a major issue due to the small stature of Asians and the demands of jungle, swamp, and mountain warfare.

The use of exotic weapons (for example, foreign submachine guns, shotguns, etc.) must be mentioned. Simply put, they were not widely used for a variety of reasons foremost of which, was ammunition and magazine compatibility. It was impractical, and dangerous, to use a weapon that used ammunition and magazines different from the remainder of the unit. It was just as impractical for hastily assembled helicopter resupply loads to include different calibers of ammunition. It was common practice for the enemy to fire on any weapon that sounded different or at an individual armed differently. One's own troops might even fire on a different-sounding weapon.

SF troopers tended to be inventive, and unauthorized weapon modifications and bizarre experiments with munitions were common. Group frequently issued directives forbidding such grassroots research and development, usually after an accident or reported safety violation, which tended to be extreme. SF "R & D" led to .30cal quad-mounted machine guns, ground-launched 2.75in. helicopter rockets, small arms with cut-down barrels and stocks, and all sorts of devilish demolitions and booby traps.



Special Forces Training Group, Phase I field
training exercise, Camp Mackall, NC

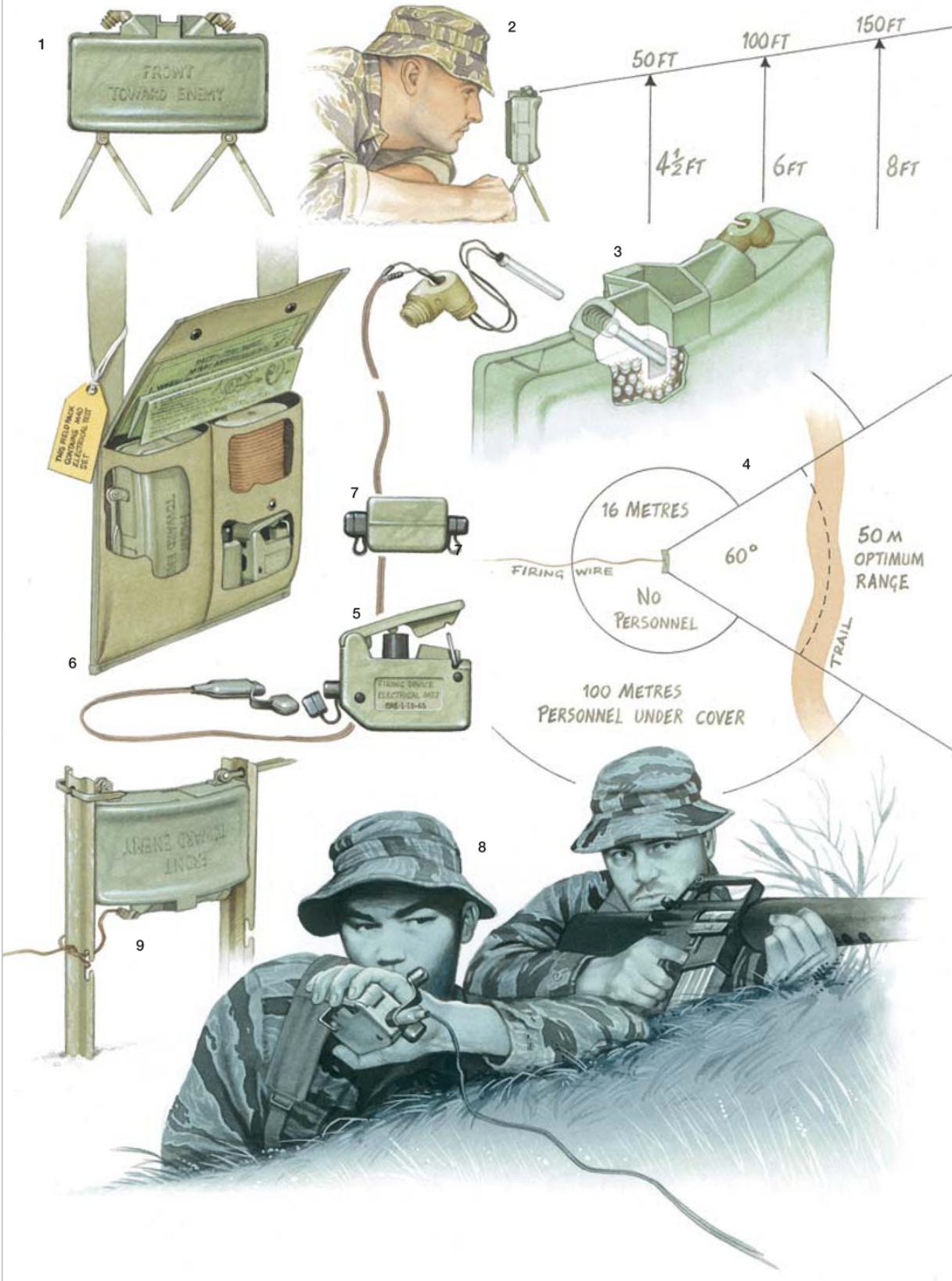
Staff sergeant, US Army Special Forces, Vietnam, 1963



Special Forces clothing and insignia in Vietnam



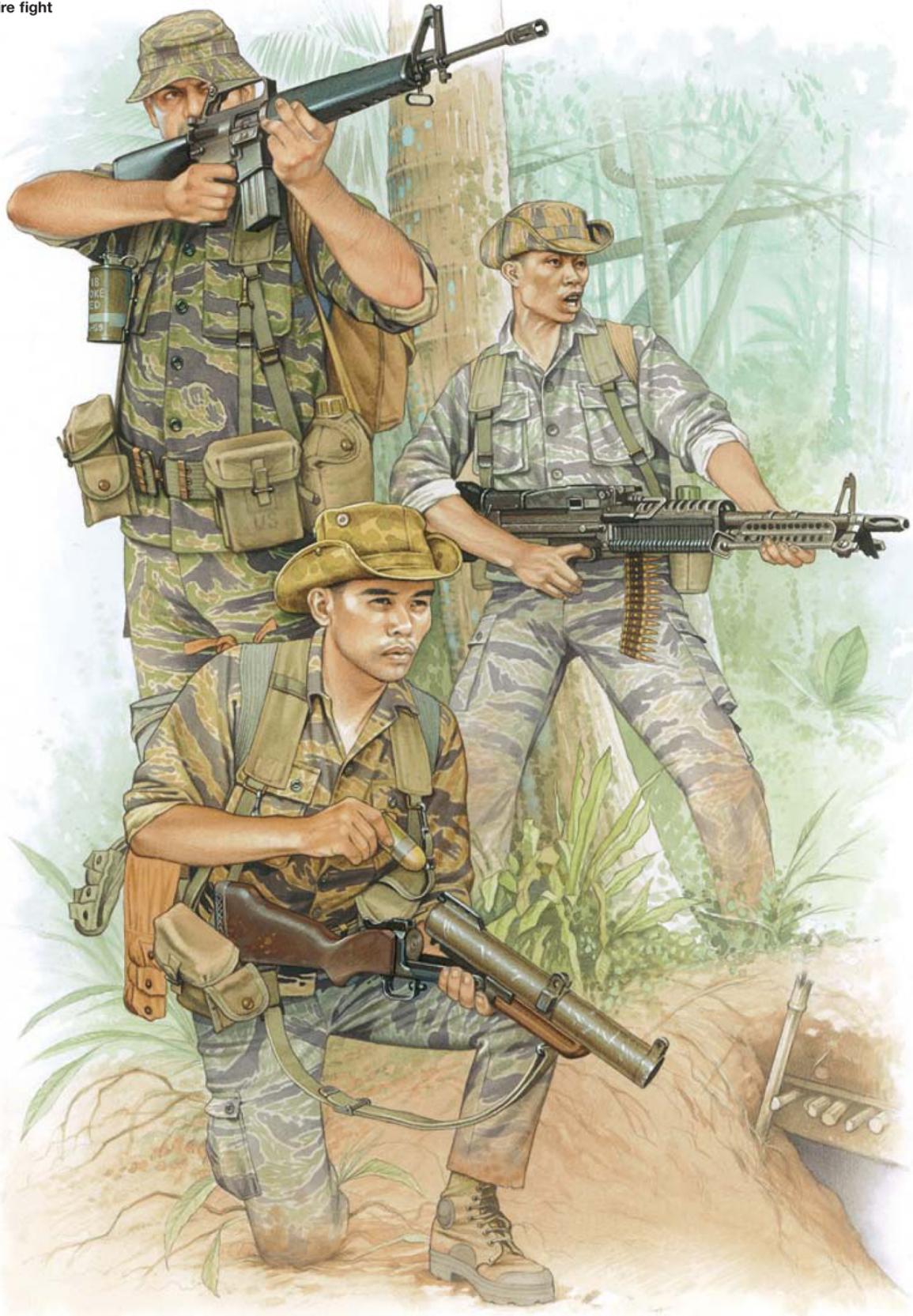
Claymore ambush



Mortar training



Fire fight



Sergeant first class, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1970



The key to life ... the radio





Led by a USSF NCO, CIDG Strikers launch an attack from a 1,000lb bomb-crater to assault across a shallow river. I CTZ, 1968.

Individual weapons

The .30cal M1903A3 rifle was adopted in 1942 to speed production over earlier models. The '03 Springfield, held in reserve stocks for just such a contingency, was issued to Montagnard self-defense forces in the early 1960s. However, although "Yards" (nickname for the *Mao* tribal groups) are larger than Vietnamese, the 8.69lb,¹¹ five-shot, bolt-action rifle's recoil was excessive and it was soon replaced by more handy carbines.

The semi-automatic, 9.5lb .30cal M1 rifle, while inflicting less recoil than the '03, was heavier and difficult for Vietnamese to handle. The eight-shot M1 Garand saw limited use in strike forces. Some use was made of M1C and M1D sniper rifles, which were standard M1 rifles fitted with a telescope mount, 2.2x M84 telescope, leather cheek-rest laced to the stock, and M2 cone-shaped or T37 prong-type flash hider.

The .30cal M2 carbine was adopted in 1945 and intended as a more compact weapon than a rifle, but more substantial than a pistol. It was a lightweight, 5.5lb, selective-fire weapon and had a 30-round "banana clip" magazine. A few examples had the barrel cut down almost to the forearm

and the butt stock cut off to a pistol grip. The M2 was declared the CIDG's standard shoulder weapon in 1962. Semi-automatic M1 carbines were also used, with both 15- and 30-round magazines. The cone-shaped M3 flash hider was seldom available. While the carbine's lighter weight and high rate of fire made it an excellent weapon for small-statured Asians, these guns lacked sufficient hitting power and penetration, and they were eventually outclassed by the AK-47 assault rifle.

The .45cal M3A1 submachine gun (SMG) initially saw wide issue to the Mountain Commandos and Trailwatchers, often with the cone-shaped T34 flash hider attached. It was felt that its high rate of fire, knockdown power, and compactness would be of benefit. However, the "grease gun" proved to be a disappointment due to its inaccuracy at even short ranges and its heavy weight (8lbs); each loaded 30-round magazine added 2½lbs. Very small numbers of even heavier Thompson .45cal M1A1 SMGs were issued. The 10lb 7oz Tommy gun used both 20- and 30-round box magazines, the latter being more common.

Small numbers of foreign 9mm submachine guns were provided by the CIA in the early days. These included the German MP.40 SMG (incorrectly called the Schmeisser) and the Swedish Carl Gustav m/45b SMG (commonly known as the "Swedish K"). Even more widely used was the Danish Manden M/50 SMG. The MP.40 and M/50 used 32-round magazines while the m/45b had a 36-round magazine.

The selective-fire 5.56mm XM16 rifle was adopted by SF in 1962 to replace the M2 carbine. The "black magic" had significant teething problems, but these were eventually resolved, and the XM16E1 was standardized as the M16A1 rifle on February 28, 1967. Improvements included a bolt forward assist device, better-designed bolt and buffer, chrome-plated chamber, and improved flash hider. Related improvements included changing the cartridge's propellant and refining cleaning and lubricating procedures. The M16A1 was first issued to CIDG units in the spring of 1969, replacing M1 rifles, M2 carbines, BARs, and various submachine guns. The M16A1 weighed just under 6lb 5oz and had a 20-round magazine.



An SF officer and his radio operator conduct a last minute “commo check” on an AN/PRC-77 radio prior to departing on a helicopter assault, Dong Tre, A-222, 1969.

The 5.56mm XM177, XM177E1, and XM177E2 SMGs were highly modified versions of the M16 rifle with a shortened barrel and forearm, large flash hider (serving as a counterbalance, it was not a suppresser), and telescoping stock. The Air Force's XM177 had a 10in. barrel and lacked a bolt forward assist, while the Army's E1 added a bolt assist. Both were issued in 1966. The more widely used E2 had an 11 1/2in. barrel and was introduced in 1967. Commonly known by their commercial designation, CAR-15 (Colt Automatic Carbine), all three were used by recon teams and MIKE Forces, but a few found their way to A-camps. A 30-round magazine was available, but shortages often forced the use of 20-round ones.

The 40mm M79 grenade launcher saw widespread use, adding greatly to small unit firepower (see [Plate F](#) for characteristics). Limited use was made of 12-gauge pump and automatic (actually semi-auto) shotguns. The Army had a number of standard adapted commercial models in the inventory, all with 20in. cylinder bore barrels and 6-round tubular magazines. Among these were the Winchester Model 1200; Remington Models 11-48*, 31 and 870; Savage Model 720C*; Stevens Model 620A; and Ithaca Model 37 shotguns (*semi-auto). The idea of using shotguns in jungle combat is outwardly appealing due to their apparent devastating firepower and ability to sweep underbrush with 00 buckshot at a high rate. The reality, however, is that buckshot has only limited penetration through dense vegetation (even

less in bamboo) and once emptied, can only be reloaded one round at a time.



Rhade Montagnard Strikers from the Camp Buon Blech, A-238, cross a log bridge as some fill their canteens. A .30cal M1918A2 BAR is seen in the foreground as it's hoisted high to keep it dry. On this operation the 582d CIDG Company killed 64 VC.

Each SF soldier was authorized a Colt .45cal M1911A1 pistol, according to tables of organization and equipment, but few were actually on-hand, and they were seldom carried in the field. The CIA issued a small number of Belgian-made 9mm Browning Hi-Power M1935 pistols in the early days, along with some German 9mm Luger P.08 and Walther P.38 pistols, most of which returned home with veterans. A wide variety of privately purchased handguns could be encountered in Vietnam, most of which were brought into the country by SF troopers against regulations, and sold or given to fellow team members when they departed. In this manner, such guns were handed down for years. The most common calibers were .45cal and 9mm pistols and .38 Special and .357 Magnum revolvers.



After days and sometimes weeks in the jungle SF NCOs tended to present a ragged appearance. Nonetheless, contrary to conventional wisdom, it did not hinder their combat capabilities.

The .30cal M1918A2 Browning automatic rifle, was intended to provide the rifle squad's base for fire. At 19lbs 6oz, it was difficult for most Asians to handle. The bipod-equipped BAR had selective slow and high rates of fire and a 20-round magazine.

Crew-served weapons

The air-cooled Browning .30cal M1919A6 light machine gun was issued on the basis of two per CIDG company (Camp Strike and MIKE Forces). They were also the principal machine gun mounted in camp defensive bunkers. The 31lb M1919A4 light machine gun was also used for this purpose. The

32lb 8oz M1919A6 had a lighter barrel than the A4, included a modified muzzle-bearing fitted with flash hider, bipod, carrying handle, and detachable stamped-steel shoulder stock. It could be mounted on a 14lb M2 tripod, on which the A4 was used. They were fed by a disintegrating link belt issued in 250-round cans.

Small numbers of 7.62mm M60 machine guns were issued to CIDG companies in lieu of the M1919A6. The M60 was a lighter weapon and was more easily handled by Asians, who called it the “number sixty.” M1919A6s remained in camp bunkers. The 23lb 1oz M60, usually used on its bipod, could also be mounted on a 15lb M122 tripod. The weapon had selective fire and a quick-change barrel. It was fed by a disintegrating link belt issued in 100-round fabric assault packs (two to a can).

Camps usually had one to four Browning .50cal HB-M2 machine guns (HB = heavy barrel) mounted atop towers or in key bunkers. It was overkill if used to repel ground attacks,¹² but was excellent for suppressing enemy weapon positions and long-range fires on suspected positions. It weighed 84lbs; its M3 tripod added 44lbs. The “fiftycal” used disintegrating link belts issued in 100-round cans. M60s, M1919A4/A6s, and HB-M2s were fully automatic only, but their 450–550 rounds-per-minute cyclic rate permitted single shots with ease.

Two 60mm M19 mortars were issued to each CIDG company and reinforced camp defensive fires. Three, four, or more 81mm M29 mortars were emplaced in most camps as key defensive weapons (see [Plate E](#) for both mortars’ characteristics). The World-War-Two-vintage 81mm M1 mortar saw use in the early days and was still found in some camps until the US withdrawal in 1973. It weighed 136lbs with its M1 mount and had a maximum effective range of 3,290yds¹³ and a minimum of 100yds.

One or more 4.2in. M30 mortars were issued to many camps. Camps with no 105mm howitzers could have up to four “four-duces” (107mm). The massive rifled 672 $\frac{1}{4}$ lb mortar had a maximum effective range of 5,500yds. Its minimum range was 800yds, making it of marginal use in camp defense, except for firing illumination. It was mainly used to provide fire support to combat patrols and to suppress enemy positions if under siege.



A common scene that transcends the ages of warfare: a group of men clustered around a map or crude sketch in the dirt. CIDG platoon leaders in spotted “duck-hunter” camouflage brief SF A-413 NCOs on their patrol routes, Camp Binh Thanh Thon, 1967.

Man-portable antitank weapons were employed mainly for direct fire support and as antipersonnel weapons for camp defense, rather than for their intended use. The Korean-War-era 3½ in. M20A1B1 rocket launcher saw limited use in the early days as a fire support weapon in the field. The 13lb “bazooka” had a 270yd effective range against point targets and 900yds for area targets with its 9lb M28A2 high explosive anti-tank (HEAT) and M30 WP rockets. The “three-point-five’s” aluminium tube could be broken down into two sections for carrying.

Many camps had one to three Korean-War-era 57mm M18A1 recoilless rifles, which were no longer used by the conventional Army. The 44lb weapon could be fired from the shoulder, its bipod, or a 53lb 2oz M1917A1 tripod (as used with the .30cal M1917A1 water-cooled machine gun). Ammunition included M306A1 HE, M307A1 HEAT, M308A1 WP, and T25E5 canister (154 or 176 stacked, cylindrical steel slugs). It had a

maximum effective range of around 1,000yds from the shoulder and 1,800yds from the tripod with an M86F telescope. It was mainly used as an anti-personnel weapon (HE and canister, the latter with a 180yd maximum effective range); the HEAT round penetrated less than one inch of armor.

The 66mm M72 and M72A1 light antitank weapons were single-shot, disposable rocket launchers introduced in the early 1960s. The LAW's HEAT rocket had a maximum effective range of 251yds. The 5lb 3oz weapon was mainly used to knock out bunkers, but was also an excellent anti-sniper weapon when fired into a tree. It was prone to misfire due to moisture infiltrating the firing system, and it frequently failed to detonate unless it struck a solid, near-vertical surface. Firing a LAW at a bamboo hut resulted in a puff of dirty gray smoke and a hole a few inches in diameter through both walls.

A few camps, especially those on the Laotian and Cambodian borders after Lang Vei was overrun in February 1968 and Ben Het was attacked by NVA PT-76 tanks in March 1969, received one or two 106mm M40A1 recoilless rifles. It was on a dismountable M79 tripod aboard an M825 weapons carrier (a modified $\frac{1}{4}$ -ton M151A1 truck, or jeep). When a "one-oh-six" was issued, it was stipulated that the 460lb rifle had to remain mounted on the jeep, as it was feared by Group that some A-teams might requisition the weapon only to selfishly procure an additional scarce jeep. It mounted a .50cal M8C spotting rifle, using a shorter cartridge than the .50cal machine gun. The weapon had a 2,200yd range with HEAT, WP, high explosive plastic-tracer (HEP-T) (for both anti-personnel and AT use), and anti-personnel-tracer (AP-T) (flechette – $\frac{1}{4}$ in. darts). It could knock out any tank in the NVA inventory.

A small number of camps were issued a pair of towed 105mm M101A1 howitzers (designated M2A1 prior to 1962) in mid-1969 to improve their fire support capabilities. The "one-oh-five" had a range of 6.8 miles with HE, HEP-T, HEAT, WP, AP-T, and illumination. Many camps already had an attached ARVN artillery platoon with either two 105mm M101A1 or 155mm M114A1 howitzers.

LIFE IN THE FIELD

Combat operations conducted in the camp's TAOR were of limited duration and scale. They focused on area denial and interdiction of enemy forces. The lightly armed Strikers were not intended for long-duration, high-tempo operations against major enemy units; their operations tended to be simple in both plan and goals. Most engagements were small, chance encounter firefights and ambushes fought against small Local Force VC elements. The Strikers and VC were fairly evenly matched, except that the Strikers were normally in company strength and they could call for artillery, attack helicopters, and air strikes, which suddenly made an action rather one-sided and the result inevitable.



The commander of A-301, Camp Long Hai, moves with the reaction force company to check out an abandoned coastal resort.

This camp spent part of its career as the III CTZ CIDG training center.

Many of the tactics and techniques used by both sides were similar. SF soldiers tend to read history, especially at the tactical level, more than their conventional counterparts, borrowing techniques from past guerrilla wars. They seldom closely imitated tactics outlined by the “Ft Benning School for Boys” – Officer Candidate School.

Vicious battles with Main Force VC and NVA units increasingly took place as the war escalated. By 1968, Vietnam was not a guerrilla war, but a mid-intensity conflict with large, conventional maneuver forces being employed by both sides.

For the most part, however, strike force operations were at the low end of the tactical spectrum. Operations were generally around five days in duration, with one company kept in the field at all times. The combat reconnaissance platoon would run similar length operations every couple of weeks or might work in conjunction with a company. The companies usually walked into and out of their AOs (the Area of Operations was a temporarily assigned area in which units conducted combat operations) but helicopters were sometimes provided. In such cases, a company going into the field could be inserted by helicopter in the morning and the same choppers would pick up the in-coming company from a different area within the TAOR.

Two Americans and one or two LLDB would accompany each operation. A single interpreter and two radio-telephone operators (RTO)¹⁴ would be detailed to them while the LLDB would have his own RTO. The operation itself consisted of simply conducting sweeps through areas suspected of containing VC. In dense forests and steep terrain, the company would move in a column, with appropriate outer security, a “long green line.” In areas with light underbrush an “open box” would be formed, with one platoon on line across the front and the others in columns on the flanks (sides) of the box. Local villages would be checked along with known trails and possible water points. In many instances the Strikers were native to the area they operated in and visits to villages became homecoming affairs. Information on local VC activities was freely provided by the villagers. Day and night ambushes would be established on likely enemy routes.

Each of the companies’ three platoons had two or three 40mm M79 grenade launchers with 30 rounds apiece. Though a weapons platoon was

authorized to have two 60mm mortars and M60 machine guns, the authorization existed only on paper. The two M60s, with each gun's 800 rounds distributed between riflemen, were simply attached to the lead platoons, while the mortars remained in camp as they were too heavy to take to the field. In any case, artillery could be called as needed along with air strikes. While few frag grenades were carried, they were dangerous in the dense forest; lots of colored smoke grenades were hung on rucksacks for air-to-ground marking so that helicopter gunships and strike fighters could identify friendly positions. Claymores were liberally distributed for ambushes and night defense.



Working out of a forward support base established at Sa Huynh, a 1st MIKE Force NCO searches the entrance of a VC tunnel. He is armed with a 5.56mm XM177E2 submachine gun and carries its 20-round magazines in a BAR belt.

The company would begin moving at day break, usually with little if anything in the way of breakfast. It would move until about 1100 hours, then halt for a couple of hours for “pok time” and lunch. It would continue moving until an hour or so before sunset, break for dinner, and then move until last light, at which time it would occupy its night position, called the RON (Remain Over Night). Security and ambushes would be put out, guards mounted, and usually the night was spent in relative peace. The VC, contrary to popular belief, did not stealthily sneak through the jungles endlessly. Indeed, they feared the night and moved off of trails only out of necessity, often using flashlights. Nevertheless, the VC were excellent fighters and a challenging foe due to motivation, practical training, and local knowledge. The Americans reported into the camp by radio in the morning, during pok time, at 1500 hours, and after occupying the RON. All in all it was fairly routine and even boring work. The occasional contacts were, of course, memorable and were usually nasty, for one side or the other. The VC and NVA simply did not take CIDG prisoners, but USSF prisoners were sought, though few were captured.



On the edge of a bamboo forest, a patrol from Camp Tong La Chon, A-334, halts to send in one of its periodic location reports to the camp. Map grid coordinate locations were normally sent via a simple shackle code, for example, the designated ten-letter code for a particular operation might be "BLACKNIGHT" (no two letters the same) with the letters representing 1 through 9 plus 0. The patrol's six-digit grid coordinate location would be reported by substituting the corresponding letters: BLACKNIGHT 1234567890 Therefore if the coordinate is 894726 it is 'shackled' as GHCI LN.

The gear carried by an SF trooper in the field varied by preference, but a typical rucksack load follows (see [Plate G - item 8](#)). A poncho liner was placed in the indigenous ("indig") rucksack where it would act as a pad between the gear and the bearer's back. On either side were pockets for 1qt canteens. A third pocket was centered on the back. In this was placed a plastic bag containing extra field dressings, gauze rolls, adhesive tape, antiseptic, morphine, Compazine and ephedrine syrettes, sterile packets of

pre-threaded sutures, and a bottle of assorted pills. A can containing serum albumin, a blood expander, and an intravenous injection set was also carried. While the team medics had trained a couple of Strikers in each company in basic medic skills, it was the Americans who provided real emergency treatment in the field. All SF troopers received additional training from their team medics.

The usual rations were Packet, Indigenous Ration (PIR), one meal per day for the operation's planned five days, plus one spare, just in case. An equal number of cans of mackerel and cereal bars were packed. Included too was a plastic bag of coffee, sugar, cream, cocoa, chewing gum, toilet paper, and a couple of plastic spoons, all hoarded from the LRP and C-rations that occasionally came the team's way. Bottles of antimalarial pills and halazone (water purification) tablets were included.

Another plastic bag contained an empty C-rat can with slits cut in the side, a tube of matches, and half an M112 demolition charge – $\frac{3}{4}$ lb of C4 plastic explosive. A jawbreaker-sized ball of C4 would be placed in the silted can and lit. It burned like a small blowtorch and would bring a canteen cup of water to boil in a few minutes. It was safe enough, as long as one did not inhale the pungent fumes (causing brain damage) or attempt to stamp out the burning glob of C4, which would detonate. The boiling water was then added to the PIR instant rice. While the rice was heating up and expanding in its tube-like plastic bag, a can of mackerel would be heated. The canteen cup, now filled with more water, would have a packet of pre-sweetened Koolaid poured in. After only a cereal bar and a cup of lukewarm coffee for breakfast and no lunch, the rice and mackerel never seemed to heat fast enough for the much-anticipated single meal of the day.

Still another plastic bag held a pair of socks and OG undershirt and boxer undershorts. The latter item was not intended as underwear, but as an outer garment. Tiger-stripes were of comparatively flimsy construction and it was common for the crotch to rip out when crawling up stream banks or over fallen trees. The boxer shorts were simply pulled over the trousers as a quick fix.

A tightly rolled nylon indig hammock, with an 18in. extension sewn to one end to accommodate an American, was shoved in. An indig poncho, also with an 18in. extension, with the hood removed and its opening covered with a patch, was placed on top. This was used as a fly pitched over the hammock rather than as a rain garment. Two white-star parachute pop-

up flares, for self-illumination, were shoved into the sides along with a penlight and Air Force survival knife. Most troopers did not look at this excellent knife as a weapon, but a tool, and carried it where it would not be lost. M18 smoke grenades, one each in red, yellow, and violet, were attached to web loops on the rucksack's back.



**A typically uniformed SF trooper about to depart on a patrol.
Note the can of serum albumin behind his neck, the M18 colored**

smoke grenade, and the olive-drab tape applied to the handguard of his M16A1 rifle to break up its solid black appearance, which otherwise tended to stand out.

The small rucksack weighed less than 30lbs. However, unlike many US infantrymen, who often fastened all their gear to their rucksack or carried only limited items on their web gear, SF tended to load their harnesses down. A description of typical web gear is provided in [Plate G2](#).

A field bivouac simply entailed selecting two suitable trees and stringing the hammock between them. If it looked like rain the poncho was erected as a simple fly. The web gear and rucksack were stowed under the hammock. The RTO turned over the radio, also placed under the hammock, and the trooper slept (fully clothed) with the handset tucked beside his ear. The poncho was needed only during the dry season with its comparatively cool nights and an issue sweater was comfortable in the northern mountains. Insect repellent was used rather than a bulky mosquito net regardless of the density and aggressiveness of these insects.

Returning home

With his year in Vietnam coming to an end and the SF soldier looking forward to DEROs (Date Eligible for Return from Overseas), he frequently endured conflicting emotions. The desire for home, family, and friends was of course overwhelming, but many felt they were leaving an important part of themselves behind. It is a curious paradox in the soldier's heart that makes one yearn for the camaraderie, adventure, and excitement experienced, regardless of the dangers, strife, and boredom. Curious too are the feelings of closeness to those, in this case the stalwart Strikers, who have been a care and often a trouble. The thought of leaving those forlorn soldiers and their families brought as much sorrow to many as the thought of going home did joy. While the job had its perils, challenges, and demands, most SF soldiers viewed camp strike force duty with a strong fondness. Most of all, they would never forget their fellow team members and the Strikers.

NOTES

1. In the mid-1960s the Centre for Special Warfare received a public relations award normally given to Wall Street advertising agencies, a testament to the effectiveness of SF psychological operations.
2. The sum of SF “doctrine” was held in two small field manuals: FM 31-20, *Special Forces Operational Techniques* (some methods for doing things) and FM 31-21, *Special Forces Operations* (generally what to do on different kinds of missions).
3. South Vietnam was divided into four Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ) for regional command and control. These were ARVN commands, but were used by US forces because of their convenient designation of areas of the country and US unit boundaries were overlaid on them.
4. Due to space limitations, the LLDB cannot be fully addressed. Readers are referred to Elite 29, *Vietnam Airborne*.
5. While titles and ranks have changed, today’s A-team maintains the same structure of two NCOs in each specialty. Today’s SF also has its own MOS career field (18-series).
6. While SF medics were nicknamed “dog-killers,” the dogs were humanely treated and anesthetized throughout the process. If one died through neglect or error, the student was terminated from the course. Animal rights groups eventually forced the use of goats, for whatever difference that made.
7. Each group was assigned an area of responsibility: 1st– Asia and Pacific, 3d– Africa, 6th– Middle East, 7th– worldwide reserve (which offered the advantage of training from Alaska to the Caribbean), 8th– Latin America, 10th– Europe.
8. Three sets of tropical combat uniforms (“jungle fatigues”), two pairs of tropical combat boots (“jungle boots”), five sets of olive-green undershirts and undershorts (white were still issued Stateside), and two OG towels.
9. Officers received \$110. Unless assigned to a MIKE Force or the LLDB Training Center, which operated the MIKE Force jump school, SF troopers seldom had the opportunity to jump in Vietnam. Jumps were

few and far between for even the MIKE Forces. However, all parachute-qualified personnel assigned to SF and airborne units in Vietnam continued to receive jump pay due to non-availability of aircraft and parachutes.

10. Bangkok, Thailand; Honolulu, Hawaii; Manila, Philippines; Sydney, Australia; Hong Kong; Singapore; Tokyo; Taipei, Taiwan; or Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
11. All weights are for unloaded weapons.
12. The myth that it is illegal to fire the .50-caliber at personnel is completely unfounded.
13. Weapons adopted after the late 1950s used meters on sight range scales and firing tables, and mils in deflection and elevation scales to comply with NATO standards. Earlier weapons used yards and degrees
14. RTO was in essence a traditional term as the use of field telephones was almost unheard of.

GLOSSARY

The Vietnam War arguably produced more slang terms and acronyms than any American conflict. Only those terms generally unique to SF are described here. Regretfully, space does not permit the inclusion of the complete rich vocabulary of Vietnamese-English slang with which SF and Strikers routinely communicated. Popular pronunciations are given in quotation marks within parentheses.

A-camp: CIDG Strike Force Camp.

A-team: SF operational detachment A; the basic SF operational element.

Bac-si: Vietnamese for doctor. Common term for an SF medic.

B-team: SF operational detachment B. An SF command and control element controlling four or more A-teams.

Cambods: Ethnic Cambodians, or Khmers, or *Khmer-Serei* born and raised in Vietnam. Often served in Camp Strike and MIKE Forces.

Camp Strike Force (CSF): A battalion-size CIDG unit manning an A-camp.

CA/PO (“Kay-Pole”): Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations (Psyops).

CRP: Combat Reconnaissance Platoon. One or two were assigned to a Camp Strike Force.

CIDG (“Sidge”): Civilian Irregular Defense Group; refers to either the organization or its individual members.

COC: Combat Orientation Course, also known as “Cock Course.”

C-team: SF operational detachment C. An SF company headquarters usually controlling three or four B-teams.

CTZ: Corps Tactical Zone. Commonly called I (“Eye”), II (Two), III (Three), and IV (Four) Corps.



In the field it was not uncommon to eat only one meal a day. The priority was to travel as light as possible. Since a typical operation lasted five days, SF troopers were conditioned to deal with such reduced rations before they lost efficiency because of the light diet.

Dai-'Uy ("Die-wee"): Vietnamese for captain. Common term used by A-team members for their detachment commander.

Duck hunter suit: Early commercial spotted-pattern camouflage uniform. Also known as the leopard suit, but this was a little-used term.

Group: 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) (5th SFGA). Frequently preceded by colorful expletives.

Indig: Indigenous (native) troops or equipment items made specifically for indig troops (indig gear).

JFK Center: US Army John F. Kennedy Center for Special Warfare (Airborne) (USAJFKCSWA) at Ft Bragg, NC. Redesignated US Army JFK Center for Military Assistance (USAJFKCMA) in late 1968. Also simply "Center."

KKK: The Khrum Kampuchea Khmer ("Crom Cam-pa-che-ah Camer") was a militant political organization that sought to regain control of Lower Cambodia, i.e. the Mekong Delta, from Vietnam after the war.

Little People: Somewhat patronizing term used by SF when referring to indigenous troops; however, not as derogatory as the more common terms used by many Americans.

LL: Contraction of LLDB. Also Lima Lima.

LLDB (*Luc-luong Dac-Biêt*): Vietnamese Airborne Special Forces.

MIKE Force: Mobile Strike Force. Also MSF.

MACV-SOG (“Mac-vee sog”): Military Assistance Command, Vietnam-Studies and Observation Group.

Nungs: Ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese often serving in MIKE Forces.

PIR: Packet, Indigenous Rations.

Projects: Special reconnaissance projects: DELTA, GAMMA, SIGMA, and OMEGA.

Recondo School: MACV Recondo School operated by 5th SFGA for US and Free World forces reconnaissance personnel at Nha Trang.

RON: Remain Over Night. Refers to both the act and location of a unit's position at night; RON position.

SFOB: Special Forces Operating Base, the 5th SFGA headquarters at Nha Trang.

Striker: CIDG soldier.

TAOR: Tactical Area of Responsibility. The designated surrounding area for which a camp strike force was responsible.

Tiger-stripes: Striped camouflage pattern uniform.

Training Group: Special Forces Training Group (Airborne) (SFTG) at Ft Bragg, NC.

Trung-Si (“Trung-see”): Vietnamese for sergeant. Common general term for an SF NCO.

VOCO: Verbal Order of Commanding Officer. The authority by which an SF soldier traveled about in Vietnam. When signing in at transient billet, he would enter this in the Authority column.

Yards: Derived from the French word for mountaineers, *Montagnards*. It was used to describe mountain tribesmen serving in many Camp Strike and MIKE Forces. The Mao tribal groups.

X-Ray: Radio code word for the LLDB.



A-404 operated the 4th MIKE Force's Airboat Company. This was an extremely valuable means of transportation in the water-logged Mekong Delta. A .30cal M1919A6 machine gun is mounted in the boat's bow. Approaching Air Cat boats could be heard from a considerable distance, but it was virtually impossible for the VC to tell how far away they were, or even the direction from which they were approaching, until it was too late.



NCOs of the 5th MIKE Force await the arrival of close air support. In the MIKE Forces, SF NCOs commanded companies and combat reconnaissance platoons, with a single A-team responsible for a battalion. The A-team commander served as the battalion commander. It was interesting after the war when a former SF junior NCO, usually with only three years' active duty time, joined an Army National Guard or Army Reserve infantry unit and his company commander found that the young sergeant had commanded a company in combat.

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COLOR PLATE COMMENTARY

PLATE A: SPECIAL FORCES TRAINING GROUP, PHASE I FIELD TRAINING EXERCISE, CAMP MACKALL, NC

Each of the three phases of Special Forces training concluded with a field training exercise (FTX), in which the students practised their newly learned skills under realistic and trying conditions. The instructors, who were all Vietnam veterans, strived to make the FTXs challenging and grueling. The week-long Phase I FTX was designed to allow the practice of reconnaissance and combat patrolling, land navigation, and survival skills. The tasks included: day and night ambushes on foot troops and vehicle convoys; a night attack on a well-defended Special Forces camp, effectively trading places with the Viet Cong; and an all-night crosscountry exfiltration course.

However, the FTX's main purpose was to eliminate students who lacked the strength of will to succeed. By following round-the-clock patrols and compass courses, while all the time dogged by counterguerrilla forces and with negligible sleep or rations, the students experienced the guerrilla's hunted existence. When one mission was completed the operation order for the next was issued and minimal planning and rehearsal time was permitted. Rations were not an issue, for example the author's class of 60 students shared a single live goat and a handful of rice midway through the FTX. It was the only meal provided. Students and their gear were searched for contraband rations and candy bars prior to a night parachute jump into Camp Mackall.

No special uniforms or equipment were used by SF students. Standard Stateside-issue OG 107 fatigues, M1964 field jackets, M1951 patrol caps, and leather combat boots were worn. Standard infantry M1956 load-bearing equipment (LBE) was used, but two canteens were issued, bayonets were not carried, and the small combat, or "butt," pack was not issued. In its place was the lightweight nylon rucksack with aluminum frame. The rucksack, which was little used in Vietnam, was usually fastened to the lower portion of the frame, but could be attached to the upper. The mountain sleeping bag, usually stuffed in a waterproof clothing bag or wrapped in a poncho, was normally strapped to the upper frame. Instead of a shelter half, or "pup tent," issued to conventional troops, two ponchos were issued to SF soldiers allowing two men to build a substantial shelter. Entrenching tools, if carried, were fastened to the rucksack's frame upside-down. A radio, such as an AN/PRC-25, could be fastened to the upper portion of the rucksack's frame. Little was carried in the pack: minimal toilet items, several spare pairs of socks, the ponchos, and, under normal circumstances, rations. Mess kits were never carried. Students also placed their M1C parachutist's steel helmet in the pack once they had jumped in. In a real operation it would have been buried along with the parachute.



Members of the 47th MIKE Force Company, 4th Mobile Strike Force pose with weapons recovered from an enemy arms cache near Ba Xoai, 1968. Captured weapons include 7.62mm SGM machine guns and 7.62mm RPD light machine guns.

While M16 rifles and M60 machine guns were available, SF students carried 7.62mm M14 rifles and .30cal M1919A6 machine guns, for the simple reason that they were heavier. The M1919A6 was widely used for camp defense in Vietnam.

PLATE B: STAFF SERGEANT, US ARMY SPECIAL FORCES, VIETNAM, 1963

While the tropical combat uniform (“jungle fatigues”), which was adopted in 1963, was worn within camps, during combat operations SF troopers wore the same camouflage uniforms as the Strikers. From the late 1950s to the early 1960s, American-made spotted “duck-hunter” uniforms were purchased by the CIA for use by Strikers or from various Asian countries under Mutual Defense Assistance Program (MDAP) funding. Uniforms were also made locally by Vietnamese tailors. The duck-hunter patterns, intended for marshlands, were ineffective in dense jungles that lacked dappled sunlight; however, they did well in the Mekong Delta. No rank or unit insignia were worn on these uniforms. The Vietnamese referred to them as *Beo-Gâ'm* (leopard) pattern. The tiger-stripe “boonie hat” was the most commonly seen headgear, although duck-hunter pattern field caps were also used.



An arms cache recovered by the 1st MIKE Force in the Song The Valley, 1969. It includes scores of Communist, French, and US-made small arms and over 40 crew-served weapons. Most of the stacked arms are 7.62mm SKS carbines.



Members of the 3d MIKE Force examine part of an arms cache recovered during fighting northeast of Saigon in early 1969. The water-cooled machine guns are German World War One 7.92mm MG.08s. Some of the NCOs wear the MIKE Force's red, white, and blue scarves.

1: This staff sergeant, attached to US Army Special Forces, Vietnam, on temporary duty from the 1st Special Forces Group, wears mostly standard M1956 LBE with an indigenous rucksack. World-War-Two and Korean-War-era web gear was also widely used. The early tropical combat boots ("jungle boots") varied in pattern as they were test items.

2: The 5.56mm XM16 rifle was adopted by SF in 1962, but many SF troopers favored M2 carbines (see below).

3: Troopers often chose to carry M2 carbines to ensure ammunition compatibility with the troops they advised.

4: The .45cal M3A1 submachine gun (also known as the “grease gun”) was almost universally fitted with a T34 flash hider. It was a weapon, like those illustrated in [Plate B](#) (items **5** and **6**) that were often issued to Strikers from CIA stocks in the early days of America’s involvement in Vietnam.

5: “Swedish K” 9mm m/45b with a six-magazine pouch.

6: Danish Madsen 9mm M/50 submachine gun.

7: The indigenous rucksack was copied from a captured NVA model by the CIA’s Counterinsurgency Support Office (CISO) and manufactured in Taiwan, Okinawa, and South Korea for less than US \$3.00 each. Most examples were made from gray-green waterproofed canvas, but some were of untreated OD (olive-drab) canvas.

8: Plastic canteens had not yet widely replaced the metal model. A canteen cup and a Korean War-era M1910 carrier are depicted.

9: The lensatic compass was often carried in an M1943 first aid pouch, but M1956 pouches were also used.

10: The field dressing was carried in an M1956 OG (olive-green) first aid pouch.

11: The combat, individual, or C ration (“C rats”), weighed almost 2lbs and provided a complete high-calorie meal. It comprised of meat unit, canned fruit or dessert, a B unit with crackers, spread or chocolate drink mix and cookies, and an accessory packet with matches, cigarettes, toilet paper, instant coffee, salt, sugar, cream packets, and chewing gum.



Strikers and an SF NCO examine a 12.7mm DShKM-1938 machine gun that has been blown off a PT-76 tank in the background. It was one of two that were knocked out by US M48A3 tanks when they attacked Camp Ben Het, A-244, April 1969.

12: Madsen submachine magazine pouch.

13: World-War-Two-era hand grenades were still in use early in the war and included Mk 2A1 fragmentation (“pineapple”) grenades with packing container, as well as the examples illustrated in [Plate B](#) (items [14](#) and [15](#)).

14: M15 white phosphorus (“Willy Pete”) grenade.

15: M18 colored smoke hand grenades (red, yellow, green, violet – indicated by the color of the top). The M18 was used throughout the war, but this one bears early color coding.

PLATE C: SPECIAL FORCES CLOTHING AND INSIGNIA IN VIETNAM

1: The green beret, or officially, “beret, man’s, wool, rifle green, army shade 297,” was as much an organizational insignia as a uniform item. The battle to legitimize the wearing of the beret began in 1954 and lasted until it was finally authorized in 1961 (and it is a story that is well documented in other sources). During the Vietnam War, it was the only beret authorized by Army regulations, regardless of others worn by certain units. Upon completion of Phase I training the beret was awarded in a simple ceremony. The students arrived wearing baseball caps with their berets in their trouser pockets. After a short speech by the chief instructor alluding to the honor of wearing the beret and the trials yet to come, the order, “Don, berets,” was given, with someone in the formation muttering, “Who’s Don Barays?”

2: The 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) flash was worn over the left eye. The same flash had previously been worn by US Army Special Forces, Vietnam, from 1963 until late 1964, when the 5th SFGA arrived to replace the USASF. The 5th SFGA had previously worn a white-bordered black flash. All SF units wore the 1st Special Forces crest, although officers wore their rank in its place.

3: One of the first purchases made by the SF trooper after arriving in Vietnam was a tiger-stripe “boonie hat” from a Da Nang tailor shop. Designs and patterns varied and it would become a cherished memento.

4: More commonly known as “jungle fatigues,” the tropical combat uniform was the principal duty uniform worn by all US forces in Vietnam. Development of prototype uniforms took place in the early 1950s, but it was not until October 1962 that the Army specified the need for such a uniform. Standard cotton OG 107 fatigues were worn in Vietnam prior to the issue of jungle fatigues. The tropical uniform’s design was based on the M1942 parachutist’s suit. It was extremely functional, lightweight, fast drying, and one of the most popular field uniforms adopted. Made of shade 107 olive-green (OG) fabric, its color provided effective concealment in Vietnam. The uniform was standardized on June 20, 1963 and issue soon began to troops in Vietnam. It was made of wind-resistant cotton poplin and featured shoulder loops, side-adjusting tabs on the coat, anti-gas flaps inside the trousers’ fly and coat front opening, and exposed pocket flap buttons (the August 1964 specification had concealed pocket flap buttons). The name and “U.S. ARMY” tapes were sewn on either horizontally (as here) or parallel with the slanted pocket top; it was a decision left up to the unit or even individuals. The LLDB patch was worn on the left breast pocket to indicate USSF’s advisory capacity to that organization. LLDB jumpwings were honoraritih awarded to all USSF personnel. The horizontal manner of tape display was standardized in February 1968. Black-on-white name tapes were used until 1965, when black-on-OG were authorized in Vietnam. Gold-on-black “U.S. ARMY” tapes were used until replaced by black-on-OG in 1966 in Vietnam. Full-color unit insignia and skill badges remained in common use, even though subdued black-on-OG insignia were authorized in July 1966. Due to continued shortages, it was not until 1970 that subdued insignia completely replaced full-color. This sergeant wears the Combat Infantryman and Parachutist Badges.

A mystery to many troops was a small pocket inside the trousers left cargo pocket. It was usually used to carry a wallet or cigarettes in a plastic bag, but it had been intended for a never-issued survival kit.

5: The December 1966 specification class 1 tropical combat uniform deleted the shoulder loops, side tabs, and anti-gas flaps. Except for some early versions still made of cotton poplin, this issue was fabricated of rip-stop cotton poplin (class 2 uniforms were made of four-color woodlands camouflage fabric and were little used by USSF). Subdued insignia had largely replaced the full-color, although both types could be worn mixed on the same uniform due to availability. Black metal pin-on collar rank insignia were authorized for wear in Vietnam in July 1967, to be followed by the rest of the Army the next year. In October 1969, it was directed that name and "U.S. ARMY" tapes be sewn on parallel with the slanted pockets to make them fully visible along with any skill badges. This sergeant first class wears the Combat Medic and Master Parachutist Badges. The LLDB patch was often worn in a clear plastic hanger.

6: The "tiger-stripe" uniform has come to be identified as *the* Vietnam camouflage pattern. From 1962, it was the standard CIDG uniform. The origins of its design are unknown, but it is believed to have been developed in an Asian country – Thailand is the best guess – and recommended by US advisors. Besides CIDG use, it was widely employed by US and other Free World reconnaissance units. However, its first use was by the Vietnamese Marines, who referred to it as the "sea wave-pattern." It proved to be an extremely effective pattern and coloration for most areas of Vietnam. Some examples were manufactured in Vietnam, but most were acquired through MDAP off-shore procurement purchases from Thailand, Taiwan, Okinawa, and South Korea. Consequently, color, pattern, fabric, and design differences varied greatly. In the several issues the author's camp received, no two sets of shirts and trousers matched. It was not uncommon for "tigers," "duck-hunter," and OG uniform components to be mixed by Strikers. MDAP procured "tiger-stripes" in size ranges appropriate for Asians and Americans. USSF, like their Strikers, wore no insignia on "tigers" in the field. It was important that troopers were as indistinguishable as possible, regardless of the difference in size between them and their Strikers.



In one of the most vicious battles experienced by MIKE Forces, two battalions of the 4th and 5th MIKE Forces cleared the Seven Mountains in the Mekong Delta in March 1969. To support the operation a special weapons platoon was formed from 5th SFGA headquarters volunteers to man 106mm recoilless rifles, .50cal machine guns, and flamethrowers. This picture illustrates the rugged, boulder-strewn terrain.



A temporary hospital established to support a MIKE Force operation is manned by CIDG nurses, medics, and technicians, all trained by USSF medics and backed by five American surgeons.

7: Besides the black, square, open-face buckle and tip, the issue trouser belt was worn with a heavier brass version as well as the rectangular, solid-faced brass buckle and tip as worn with service uniforms.

8: OG 107 undershirts and OG 109 boxer undershorts began to be issued in early 1966. Prior to 1966, white underwear was often dyed green by individuals before deployment.

9: OG 408 cushion-sole boot socks began to replace the black shade 51 version in 1968.

10: Based on the 1943 combat boot, limited issues were made of M1945 tropical combat boots found in depots. The development of the modern tropical combat boot, or "jungle boot," began in 1955 with various test models issued to USSF and advisors in Vietnam in the early 1960s. Standard black all-leather combat boots were worn by those not issued test boots.

11: Most test boots had cotton canvas or nylon uppers with Vibram soles. Various different materials were used in other components.

12: A standardized jungle boot was not adopted until January 1965. The model chosen contained a punji stake-resistant insole. From May 1966 the jungle boot was improved by adding a two-piece, steel spike protective insole. It was also made with better materials, had nylon reinforcing webbing on the sides, and the "Panama sole," which was more effective in shedding mud. Vibram-soled boots were issued into 1969, however.

13: US Special Forces shoulder sleeve insignia, full-color and subdued.

14: LLDB insignia.



CIDG Strikers seriously wounded in combat were rehabilitated and taught new job skills before they were discharged. This prepared them for civilian life, increased the Strikers' confidence in USSF, and reduced the burden on the Vietnamese welfare program. Unfortunately, seriously disabled former CIDG today do not receive aid from the communist government of Vietnam, as they were employees of the US Government and not Vietnam.

PLATE D: CLAYMORE AMBUSH

1: Besides endless patrols through jungles, hills, and swamps in search of an elusive enemy, the ambush was a principal offensive tactic employed by Special Forces. Established on trails suspected to be in use by the enemy, the key to success was firepower. A high volume of aimed rifle fire, machine guns, and 40mm grenade launchers provided the required firepower. However, it was the Claymore M18A1 antipersonnel mine (seen here) that proved to be most devastating in an ambush. Unlike conventional mines, the Claymore was emplaced above ground and was not activated by stepping on it. A curved, rectangular fiberglass box contained 704 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. diameter steel ball bearings embedded in a plastic matrix and backed by 1½lbs of C4 plastic explosive. The Claymore was emplaced on two pairs of folding metal legs outside the kill zone to cover a 60-degree fan.

2: The Claymore was aimed (the front was marked "FRONT TOWARD ENEMY") by means of an integral sight at a point about 8ft off the ground some 150ft away.

3: A detonator was inserted in one of the Claymore's two cap wells and the 100ft electrical firing wire was run to a protected firing position.

4: There was a great deal of blast and secondary fragmentation to the rear and sides, 110yds and more. With multiple Claymores covering the kill zone in overlapping fans, it was essential that consideration be given to the positioning of friendly troops.



The MIKE Forces fought many extremely brutal battles, often suffering terrible casualties. Here walking wounded of the 3d MIKE Force are guided towards one of three CH-47 helicopters necessary to evacuate just the walking wounded near Puc Phong, 1969.

5: An M57 firing device was fitted to the firer's end of the wire after the mine had been emplaced and concealed. Known as a "clacker," the firing device looked like a staple gun and generated an electrical current when punched to immediately detonate the mine.

6: Each mine was issued in a canvas, two-pocket carrying bag packed six to a box. In the bag was a plastic spool with the firing wire and detonator and a firing device.

7: An M40 test set was issued with every six mines to check the continuity of the electrical firing system. A pinhole light indicated a good circuit.

8: There were two tricks that contributed to a successful Claymore ambush that were not taught in training centers. The detonation of a Claymore was frequently used as the signal to initiate an ambush along with opening fire with a rifle or machine gun. When the ambush force leader initiated the ambush, he would also shout "Fire!" to ensure the ambush was executed even in the event of the Claymore or rifle failing. Fractions of a second counted. Sometimes the clacker would not generate sufficient current to detonate the Claymore with that first frantic punch. Claymore firers learned to repeatedly punch the firing device until the mine detonated and not just punch it once, then hesitate or assume the detonator was a dud. In an ambush hesitation can be fatal.

Claymores could also be rigged with a tripwire for an "automatic ambush," or several mines could be linked together by lengths of instantaneous detonating cord. Command-firing one Claymore would instantaneously detonate all of the mines linked to the det cord. Sometimes automatic ambushes, or "mousetraps," with several trip-wired Claymores linked by detonating cord were left at a key point such as a known enemy stream crossing. Patrols would occasionally check the site for results.

Scores and even hundreds of Claymores were used to protect Special Forces camps with belts of mines often emplaced for command-detonation en masse; it was a tactic known as a "wave-breaker." Mines emplaced in the perimeter wire had to be secured in order to prevent sappers from removing them or turning them around to face the camp's perimeter.



SF NCOs and a Striker carry a wounded Striker from a medical evacuation (medevac) helicopter into Camp Mai Loc, the northernmost CIDG camp in Vietnam. A-101, 1969.

9: One of many techniques saw the Claymore inserted upside down in the “U” channels of two 32in. barbed wire pickets and wrapped with barbed wire. Claymores were also emplaced around the perimeter of Strike Force company or reconnaissance team night locations. Compromised reconnaissance teams being pursued by the enemy might leave a trip-wired Claymore or one with a time delay fuse to provide the pursuers with an excuse to quit.

Yet another use for Claymores came by adapting their 1½lbs of C4. With a ten-second time fuse fitted in the cap well, a Claymore could be used as a “satchel charge” to blow bunkers by shoving it through the firing port. The body could be broken open and the C4 packed into a notch cut in a tree. Using the firing wire and clacker to detonate the C4, a tree could be removed allowing an otherwise open clearing to be used as a helicopter landing zone.

PLATE E: MORTAR TRAINING

Mortars were one of the principal weapons for camp defense. It was the job of the A-Team’s weapons specialists to train the Strike Force mortar sections and the other team members in their use. Few Americans were sufficiently proficient in Vietnamese to directly present instruction on such a subject. A Vietnamese interpreter proficient in weapons terminology was employed. Often when training Montagnards or other ethnic minorities, the instruction had to be relayed through a Vietnamese interpreter to a second interpreter who spoke the local dialect. To make matters worse, many Montagnard dialects had no appropriate technical words or even words for numbers. It was necessary, therefore, to teach not only a technical vocabulary but also basic concepts, such as numbers, degrees, and units of measurement. Nevertheless, classes were informal with a certain amount of humor allowed to keep the interest of the students. It was also not uncommon for family members to sit in as a simple diversion from daily camp routine.



SF troopers were frequently accused of “going native” by their conventional counterparts. While there were instances of individuals going to extremes, it was actually part of the job. To win the loyalty of remote ethnic groups with a long history of mistreatment by the government, traders, and just about everyone else, SF had to demonstrate that they understood and sympathized with their situation.

Two 60mm mortars were authorized for the mortar section of camp and MIKE Force companies' weapons platoons. They seldom accompanied units to the field due to their weight, ammunition weight, and the quick responsiveness of supporting artillery, attack helicopters, and close air support.

1: When taken to the field, the M4 sight, M5 bipod, and baseplate were often dispensed with and replaced with a spade-type M1 baseplate, enabling the weapon to be fired in the handheld mode. These mortars were more often retained in camp for defense and emplaced in sandbagged positions.

The M19, dating from 1945, could be drop- or trigger-fired (the World War Two M2, still occasionally encountered, lacked the trigger-fire mode). The 45lb 3oz M19 had a maximum effective range of 2,000yds and a minimum range of 50yds. Their employment was simplistic, with no use made of a fire direction center. Striker crews were trained simply to point the weapon in the direction of the attack, set a given elevation, and begin dropping rounds into the wire, occasionally adding an “illum” to light up the perimeter.

2: The 81mm M29 mortar's “threaded” tube served to aid its cooling and reinforcement, allowing longer range charges (the World War Two M1 mortar had a smooth tube). The M29E1, later redesignated M29A1, was identical, but had a chrome-plated bore to prolong barrel life. The 93lb 8oz drop-fired mortar included an M53 sight, M23A1 bipod, and M3 lightweight Canadian baseplate. The M29 “eighty-one's” maximum effective range was 3,990yds with a minimum range of 76yds.

Both 60mm and 81mm mortar rounds were of the traditional fin-stabilized, tear-drop design.

Four types of 60mm rounds were available: M49A2 HE; M50 improved HE; M302A1 WP smoke; and M83A3 illumination.

Three series of ammunition were available for the 81mm. The World-War-Two-Korean-War-era series included: M43 light HE; M56 heavy HE; M57 WP; and M301A2 illumination. Modernized rounds adopted in the early 1950s included: M362 HE and M370 WP. Improved rounds, introduced

in the early 1960s, included: M374 HE and M375 WP (M301A2 illum remained standard). Besides having longer range, to take advantage of the M29 mortar's reinforced tube, the HE and WP rounds of the two improved series were ballistically matched, precluding the need to readjust the sight for different rounds. While similar in appearance to the M362/M370, the M374/M375 had a higher filler capacity, resulting in a considerably larger casualty radius.

PLATE F: FIRE FIGHT

In the dense jungles over rolling terrain, visibility was limited and sound was muffled. The opportunity for chance contact between two forces was great, especially since both were moving, their own quiet noises covering that of the enemy. Fire fights were often initiated at ranges of less than 30yds, frequently less than 10yds. Quick reaction was crucial, not only to personal survival but also to the domination of the fight by fire and maneuver. The side that succeeded in getting the most men, especially those with machine guns and grenade launchers, into position to open fire and begin flanking the enemy, was generally the victor.

The side that failed to dominate began to suffer casualties. Realizing that they were being outflanked by enemy elements extending to their right or left, their effort shifted from gaining fire superiority to disengaging and withdrawing in bounds with elements covering each other. Chance fire fights were brief, often called the "15-minute war," and casualties were light. Most were suffered in the first few seconds. The Strikers did, however, enjoy the advantage of access to the USSF NCOs and their radios. Artillery fire could be called for and delivered in less than ten minutes. Attack helicopters, or even jet fighters, could be on-station within 20 minutes. Unless they had a superior force to the CIDG, the VC would attempt to break contact if they could not crack the Strikers within the first few minutes of the fight. Their other choice was to "hug" the Strikers, getting in as close as possible to prevent the CIDG from using artillery and air strikes. If they failed to overwhelm the Strikers they could become trapped as helicopter-borne reinforcements were lifted in behind them. If either side could quickly get reinforcements into the area, fire fights could turn into pitched battles.



Camp Thuong Duc, A-109, was established in northern South Vietnam to provide a secure haven for Vietnamese refugees fleeing VC-controlled areas. Within months the camp was aiding some 8,000 refugees and its strike force kept the VC at a distance. What

struck the refugees the most was the medical care given them by the SF, which ranged from treating common colds to assisting at child birth. Such basic care was denied them by the VC.

Probably no other infantry weapon symbolizes the Vietnam War more than the “blooper” or “thumper.” Adopted in 1958, the 40mm M79 grenade launcher was lightweight, compact, simple, rugged, and delivered a tremendous amount of firepower for its size. This one has the later fibreglass stock, which was designed to prevent splitting and warping in the tropics. The M79 was intended to replace rifle grenades and fill the range gap between hand grenades and mortars. The single-shot, break-open, breech-loading weapon weighed only 6lbs and was 29in. long. CIDG rifle squads were authorized one, but there were seldom enough to arm all squads. High explosive (HE) rounds were the most commonly used, but others were available including buckshot-loaded multiple projectile, tear gas, and a wide variety of colored smoke and flare rounds for signaling. The 1972 manual listed 35 approved rounds.

HE rounds had an impact fuse and contained a golf ball-size, spherical fragmentation charge with a 5½yd casualty radius. Its maximum effective range against area targets was 382yds and 164yds for point targets. Early M381 HE rounds’ fuse armed at 2–3yds, but this could cause friendly casualties due to close-in tree-strikes or accidental firing. Later M406 HE rounds armed at 15–30yds. It would not detonate on impact at closer ranges, but was as deadly as a high-velocity brick when it hit an individual.

Ammunition could be carried in bandoleers (three rounds in each of two pockets, 12 bandoleers to a shipping case), either slung over the shoulder or with the straps cut off and hung in clusters on the rucksack. They were also carried in universal ammunition pouches (three rounds), canteen covers (six to seven rounds), or Claymore bags.

PLATE G: SERGEANT FIRST CLASS, 5TH SPECIAL FORCES GROUP (AIRBORNE), 1970

Since the early 1960s a great deal of equipment had been developed for use in Vietnam. Equipment had to be tough to survive the alternating wet and dry, hot tropical climate, and the treatment that was inflicted upon it. Virtually everything changed, from the designs of weapons to how ammunition and first aid supplies were packaged. Special clothing was developed and nylon, today the universal material of web gear, came into use.

Tiger-striped camouflage uniforms were still standard issue for Special Forces, but the quality of their fabric had improved somewhat. The outward appearance of an SF trooper (**1**) had changed little, but he was better armed and equipped.

2: There was no standard arrangement of web gear used by SF, even within a given A-team. Its configuration depended on availability, mission requirements, duties, weapons, terrain conditions, but mostly, individual preference. World-War-Two and Korean-War-era web gear, and late war nylon equipment was used by some, but the M1956 LBE saw the widest use. This example was used by an SF soldier, advising a CIDG Camp Strike Force, late in the war, and it was made up of: M1956 suspenders; nylon individual equipment belt with quick-release buckle; three nylon M16 ammunition pouches, each holding four 20-round M16A1 magazines; an M1956 universal small arms ammunition case for air/ground marking aids; Gyro Jet M186 “pen flare” projector with seven flares (**3**); signal mirror (**4**); mini smoke grenades (**5**); VS-17 marker panel section (day glow orange and pink) (**6**); two LC-1 nylon canteen covers (with pocket for water purification tablets) with 1qt plastic canteens, operational packet of a tropical survival kit (with its contents customized), two nylon first aid pouches (one for field dressings, one for lensatic compass).



A-412 medics at Camp Kinh Quan II connect an intravenous drip to a Vietnamese boy wounded by VC action. The assisting nurse wears a "duck-hunter" uniform.



The commanders of SF A-236 and the LLDB coordinate with a cargo helicopter delivering supplies to the newly established camp. The site had been secured by a 2d MIKE Force parachute assault, which remained in the area as security while the camp was built.

The diverse aids for air-to-ground signaling were important for survival. From the air the jungle appeared as a rolling green sea with few terrain features for reference. A small group of camouflaged men was extremely difficult to pin-point. A variety of means were used to attract attention. One of the most effective, day or night, was the SDU-5/E strobe light (7) usually carried in a nylon case on the suspender's shoulder. It is fitted with a blue filter to prevent air crews from mistaking its fraction

of a second flashes for muzzle flashes. It could be seen for up to ten miles and did not destroy night vision. A plastic flash guard, which was stowed by sliding it over the light's body, prevented its detection from the ground. The light could also be shielded by flashing it through the barrel of an opened M79 grenade launcher.

The "indig" rucksack was widely used by SF troopers, but from late 1968 the Army's nylon tropical rucksack (8) was acquired by some. Its design was influenced by the "indig" rucksack, but it was made of OG 106 nylon, had a spring steel frame, and numerous modern improvements. An SF trooper's rucksack held only a minimum of necessities: US poncho liner (9); "indig" poncho (10) modified as a hammock fly (18in. extension added, hood removed and patched over); "indig" hammock (18in. extension added) (11); condiment bag (12); makeshift C-ration can stove and C4 plastic explosive for cooking fuel (13); pill bottle (14); spare socks (15); Air Force survival knife (16); insect repellent (17); early type, 2qt bladder canteen packed in the top (18), and 1qt canteens in the side pockets (rations not depicted).

The Packet, Indigenous Ration (PIR) (19) is the popular Menu #5, shrimp-mushrooms. Other meals were a "sawdust-filled" sausage, beef (which left an oil slick after prolonged boiling), "boot heel" mutton, and dried fish-squid; it was like chewing a mouthful of rubber bands all day long. PIRs included a bag of instant rice and small packets of dried vegetables, candied fruit pieces, dried hot peppers, tea, salt, and a vitamin pill. Canned mackerel was a common supplement mixed with the PIR rice.



An important combat multiplier were the US Air Force O-1 Birddog light observation aircraft. These were frequently based at

forward operating locations (FOL) collocated with B-teams. The forward air controller (FAC) pilots lived with the B-teams and visited the A-teams to develop close bonds. Armed only with 2.75in. white phosphorus (WP) rockets, they were on-call to aid strike force companies by marking targets for close air support fighter-bombers.

20: The 5.56mm M16A1 rifle was issued to the MIKE Forces in early 1969 and to the Camp Strike Forces in the spring. MIKE Forces and reconnaissance projects used the 5.56mm XM177E2 submachine gun (21). The 20-round magazine was still common, but 30-round magazines were making an appearance too. Priority for the scarce 30-round magazine went to reconnaissance projects. Sometimes a pair of 20-round magazines were taped together allowing rapid magazine change.

Hand grenades too had been improved. The M26A1 fragmentation or “lemon grenade” (22) was the most widely used. The similar M61 had an additional safety clip to secure the lever. The M67 fragmentation or “baseball grenade” (23) provided even more effective and uniform fragmentation. The Mk3A2 offensive or “concussion grenade” (24) relied on its ½lb of TNT for blast effect to neutralize bunkers.

PLATE H: THE KEY TO LIFE ... THE RADIO

1: Each USSF trooper was closely followed by his assigned RTO (radio-telephone operator). Not only did he “hump” the radio for his American, but brewed morning coffee for both of them and handled other minor chores. He received a “gratuity payment” for his services in the form of a couple of highly valued M112 C4 demolition blocks. The RTO shared his good fortune with his buddies by purchasing cooking fuel.

2: A Striker RTO, seldom weighing more than 110lbs, carried little more than the radio and spare batteries, often, not even a rifle. His buddies carried his rations and bedroll. Batteries, however, were a nagging problem. Usually one a day was required per radio. Units moved with the radios habitually turned off to conserve the heavy batteries. Note the World War Two Browning automatic rifle (BAR) belt carried by the USSF trooper. Four 20-round M16A1 magazines could be carried in its six pockets, although some pockets would hold grenades, air-to-ground marker aids, and field dressings. In the field the Vietnamese Special Forces (3) strove to look as much like Strikers as possible; their capture was virtually a death sentence. This LLDB master sergeant wears the distinctive camouflage uniform adopted in the early 1960s, as was common practice by elite ARVN forces. Worn in camp, they were manufactured in both fatigue and jungle uniform styles.

In the early days patrols maintained communications with their base camp with the AN/PRC-10 manpack radio (4), which was inelegantly known as the “Prick-10” – an acronym used with all AN/PRC-series radios. This 26lb FM radio, adopted at the end of the Korean War, was heavy for its 3–5-mile range. It also required annoying manual calibration and consumed its heavy batteries at a high rate. Provided with a web carrying harness, it was more frequently carried in a rucksack. The CW-216(*)/PR accessory bag was seldom carried in the field; the extra components were simply stuck in the rucksack.

The AN/PRC-10 radio was replaced by the transistorized AN/PRC-25 (5) by 1968. This 24lb 7oz FM radio had an 5-mile planning range, was simpler to operate, more reliable, and offered 920 channels as opposed to 170. Rock-and-roll radio stations in Saigon could sometimes be picked up. The AN/PRC-77 was externally identical, but could be fitted with an AN/KY-57 secure voice device (cryptographic scrambler). The “Key-57” was only used on A-camp base radios for communications with the B-team and was never taken to the field to prevent its capture. The camp often seemed to be out of radio range. The simple expedient of lifting the radio over one’s head would sometimes provide that extra click of range.

6:Hallicrafters HT-1 walkie-talkies were widely issued to Strike Forces down to platoon-level for inter-company communications. Procured through the CIA from commercial sources, they had a range of less than 1¼ miles and operated on eight D-cell flashlight batteries. Operating instructions were printed in English and Vietnamese. They were also fitted with a self-destruct button that would burnout their circuits to prevent their use by the enemy. However, this button was often disconnected after curious Strikers caused havoc by playing with it.



SF NCOs of A-221, depart Camp Cung Son for the last time after it was converted to a Regional Force battalion as part of the phaseout of the CIDG, March 1969. Taped to the back of the suspenders' yoke of the lead man is a serum albumin can, an intravenous blood expander that saved many lives.

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